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The World Is Better With Nintendo In It

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

I quite often get accused of having one bias or another. It comes with the territory of running a video game magazine. Everyone is a sum of their experiences, so everyone has some level of bias. It's unavoidable. You use logic to temper it as best you can.

Fans, I have discovered, tend to throw logic out the window and go with pure passion to discuss bias. It is the reason fans are both amazing and sometimes impossible to talk to because they are so focused on their point of view.

There was a time in my life where I was an unapologetic fan of Nintendo. The Nintendo Entertainment System and the Super Nintendo were my sun and moon. I loved those systems, and at times my love blinded me to their faults.

Since the N64, there have been faults in Nintendo's systems, and let me tell you as someone who took time to bring them up, Nintendo fans don't want to hear it. In many fans' eyes, Nintendo can do no wrong. While I would agree they might be the most prolific game developer of all time, their hardware has been less than perfect the last few decades, especially home consoles. And yes, I said decades.

I personally had little interest in the Wii, but it is hard to deny its success despite its massive flaws. When this system was hot, it changed the video game landscape unlike any of Nintendo's home consoles had done since the '90s. Wii U had more in common with GameCube than the Wii, as it certainly had some amazing games, but the system never really hit outside of Nintendo's core fans. Let's face it, it was a flop.

Now we have the Nintendo Switch. Whether you thought I was biased for or against Nintendo, I had more than a few concerns heading into the Switch launch, but oddly I was also excited about its possibilities. Did I know I wanted a home console on the go? Not really. Didn't I already have one to some degree in the PlayStation Vita that I didn't play as much as I thought I would?

Despite my concerns, the Switch has made a believer out of me. This issue, we look back at the meteoric rise the platform experienced over the past year and interview the legendary Reggie Fils-Aimé. I still love my PlayStation, PC, and Xbox, but whether you like Nintendo or not, you have to admit the video game world is a better place when Nintendo is firing on all cylinders. The Switch has sparked the imagination of gamers and developers everywhere, and for me, has created a level of excitement I haven't felt since the glory days of the NES and Super NES.

Sure, the online services are still backward, but the future of Switch couldn't be brighter, and that makes me extremely happy.

Cheers,

46 **Spider-Man**
Insomniac has created plenty of original characters, like Spyro, Ratchet, and Clank. But for the first time in the studio's history, it is working with somebody else's hero. We visited Insomniac, got a taste of Spider-Man's story, played through some combat scenarios, and did some web-swinging in the open world. We're excited to tell you all about our experience. ***by Andrew Reiner***

NINTENDO
SWITCH

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The Switch has quickly become one of Nintendo's biggest successes. We look back at how that happened, and peek at what's next by going hands-on with Labo.

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Read this remarkable story about two friends and their video game bucket list.

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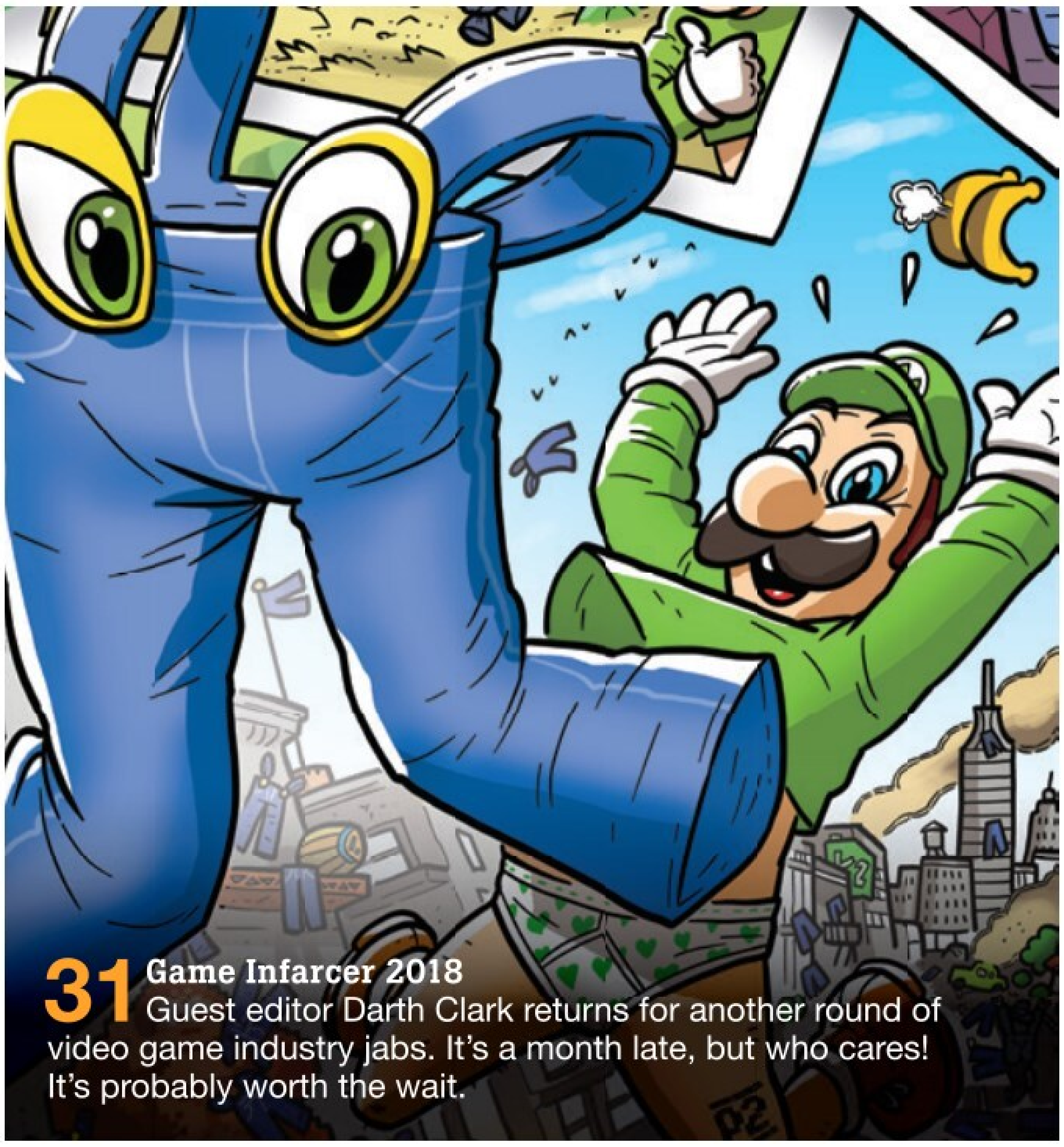
Casinos are experimenting with letting people win money with their gaming skills.



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Guest editor Darth Clark returns for another round of video game industry jabs. It's a month late, but who cares! It's probably worth the wait.

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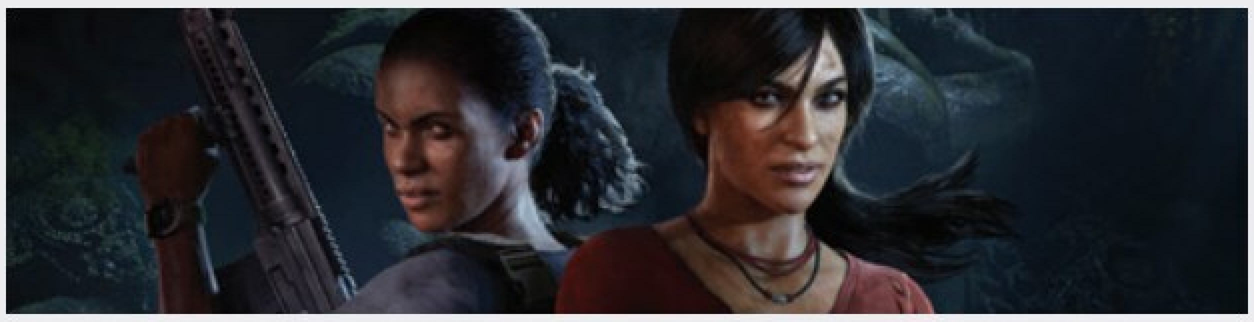
We thought full-motion video died years ago, but it has returned in a big way.



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Strong, confident women are starting to appear more and more as protagonists in video games. Kimberley Wallace explains why this is an important evolution.

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The simulation experts at Frontier are giving us a new shot to create our own functioning Jurassic Park.

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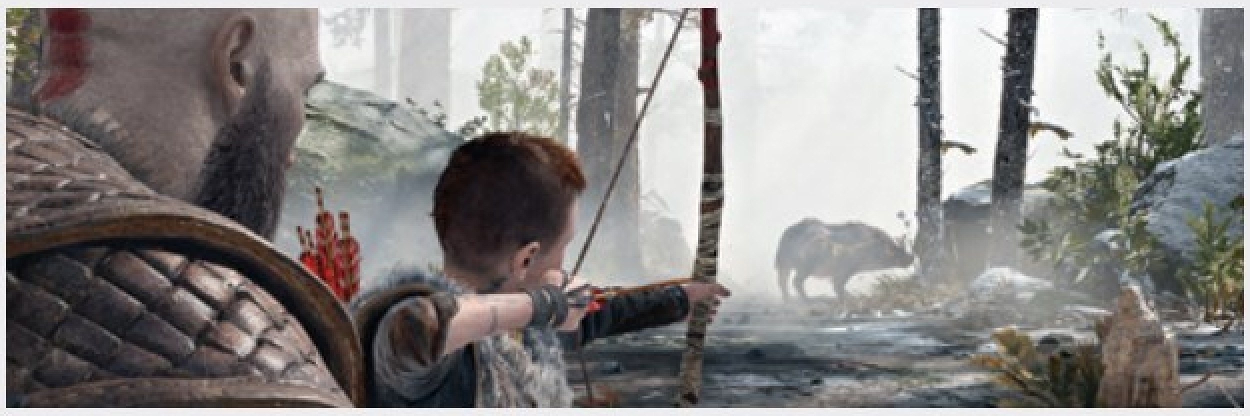

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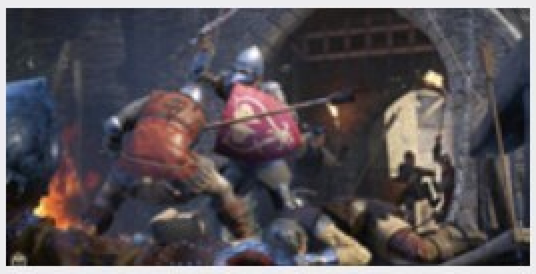
67 **Hunt: Showdown** The creators of Crysis have been quiet in recent years, but are ready to make a return.

69 **Ion Maiden** The studio behind the original Duke Nukem 3D is looking at its roots for its next shooter.

74 **Shenmue III** We check in with the Kickstarter success to make sure that it will in fact be releasing.

80 **Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom** The sequel makes some big changes from the original. Is that a good thing?

81 **A Way Out** The creator of Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons is back with a new, very different co-op experience.



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83 **Metal Gear Survive** We liked revisiting Phantom Pain's gameplay, but Survive has undeniable issues.

85 **Sea Of Thieves** Rare's long in-development pirate sim is finally out. Should you take to the high seas?

86 **Yakuza 6: The Song Of Life** After three straight success stories, Yakuza has finally found secure footing in North America.

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feedback

Last year feels like forever ago, but our readers aren't over our 2017 GOTY pick just yet. An unconventional esports idea and the coolest gaming grandpa ever are also on tap this month.

Zeroing In On Zelda

I really agree with your Top 50 Games of 2017 list (issue 298). My friends and I were looking forward to the list for a while, mostly because we were certain Breath of the Wild would be number one, so we are happy. This is the only magazine I have ever subscribed to and it's probably the only one I ever will. I'm also 14 years old, by the way, so that could change.

Jonathan Arth
via email

Why was Breath of the Wild awarded Game of the Year over other titles? Personally, I thought it was the worst entry in the series next to Skyward Sword, and also the worst game I played in 2017. It lost what made the Zelda series great for me, and felt more like 90 percent of all the other open-world games out there. I understand BotW has its fans, and I will never knock them for that. I just don't understand why it's getting all the praise and high scores from critics.

Sean Phillips
via email

The cheers and jeers for Breath of the Wild continued to roll in this month, proving our Game of the Year pick was nothing if not controversial. The G.I. staff itself remains torn on the call as well – or at least we did until we had a shiny new Top 300 list to gripe about.

Extended Fashion Advice

I wanted to respond to Natalie St. John, who wrote in about feeling scared to wear a Zelda shirt because she isn't familiar with the older games and is afraid a hardcore fan will call her out (Dress For Success, issue 299). Never ever feel the need to defend your fandom! Some communities are too hostile, and act like only the most elite fans should have the honor of enjoying it (I'm looking at you, *Rick & Morty*). Fandom is about celebrating with others. I could make the same argument about wearing a Zelda shirt from the opposite perspective, in that I'm 40 and am completely unfamiliar with the recent games. But if we talked about what makes the series so great from decades ago to the present, we could learn a lot from each other. Besides, whenever I see someone with a shirt from something I dig (especially when it's obscure), I don't quiz them and demand to see their fan membership card. Instead, I smile real big, tell 'em, "Sweet shirt!," and enjoy the shared moment of understanding that we both know what's really cool.

Dave Hulteen
via email

We couldn't have said it better ourselves! Well, we kind of did last issue, but some messages are worth repeating. Don't let gatekeeping gamers keep you down!

Now That's An Esport!

As someone who thinks that Overwatch is severely overrated but respects its place in the esports community, I had a thought recently. What if rather than having a tournament for a single game that everyone plays, there was one big tournament where the game played each round was totally randomized? We could have League of Legends, Overwatch, StarCraft, Team Fortress 2, and even some more obscure picks like Halo and Super Smash Bros. If that was all in one tournament, it could bring attention to lesser-known games, keep fans not knowing what to expect next, and even the odds when experienced players face new players. It would make the esports community much more interesting!

Will Geddes
via email

You are basically describing the Video Armageddon tournament from *The Wizard*, but regardless, we'd be totally down with it!

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Respect Your Elders

I just wanted to give a shout out to Scott C. Smith, the "nearly 50-year-old gamer" who wrote into Feedback (A Good Start, issue 299). Hey fellow! I am 71, and have been a gamer for 40 years. I just finished up Horizon: Zero Dawn, the Frozen Wilds DLC, Wolfenstein II, and Sniper Elite 4 in the last three months. I am now playing Ghost Recon: Wildlands while working 40 hours a week at a … childcare center. I'm not old, just legendary!

William F. "Wild Bill" Brockman
Former Senior Special Agent, U.S. Department of Defense
via email

We're not sure when we became a social-media platform for retired gamers, but your completed game list is most impressive, Bill! At this rate it's only a matter of time until we overtake AARP as the most-read magazine in America…

The Blame Game

I don't want this to seem like a worthless rant, but maybe that's what it is. I feel that, despite being bigger than ever, the gaming industry isn't as good as it used to be. As I scroll through my Steam library, I am reminded of the tons of games I have paid hard-earned money for, but played for less than an hour. There has never been a higher volume of games being released, but it feels like pounds and pounds of lead and I am constantly searching for that ounce of gold. I am not saying there aren't any good games, just that the percentage of worthwhile games has been significantly diluted by a huge increase in volume, making them much harder to find. Basically it boils down to business ruins everything. Or I am simply outgrowing games? I am curious to know if anyone at G.I. feels this way, or if you think I'm just being silly. I really do rely on you guys to shine a light on that ounce of gold.

Josh Reddinger
via email

It's not the industry, Josh – but it's not you, either. Rather, the fault lies at the feet of the platform holders; the onus is on them to protect their marketplaces from the endless flood of crappy knock-offs (something Steam has failed particularly hard at), and surface content their customers will actually want to play. As such, it has indeed gotten hard to find the hidden gems out there – but we'll keep doing our best to point them out each and every issue.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Do you think Nintendo is likely to make a new Switch soon?"

That certainly sounds like a Nintendo-y thing to do.

"Do you guys know if another Infamous is in the works?"

We do not.

"Will there ever be a Watch Dogs movie?"

Yes! It's called Enemy of the State, and it released in 1998.

Question Of The Month:

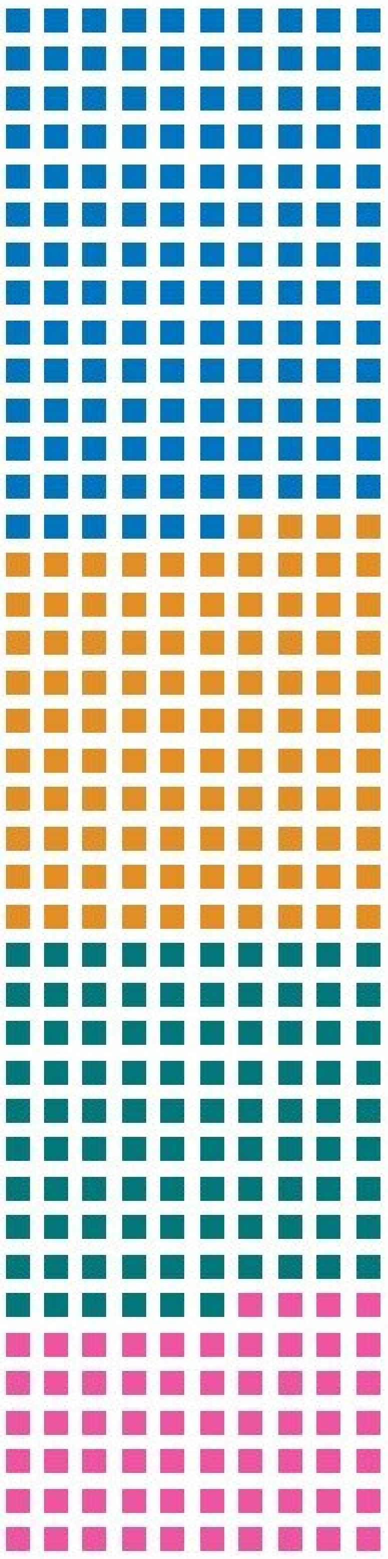
What villain absolutely needs to be in the new Spider-Man game and why?

gi spy

(Left) The Spider-Man team at Insomniac showed off their sweet web-slinging skills during our cover story visit. **(Right)** Ben Hanson used the old Chaos Theory routine to hit on Jeff Goldblum during a press event for Jurassic World Evolution. Dan Tack's "hold onto your butts" ploy didn't go over as well.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Post-Apocalyptic Weapons
- 🟧 Extended Top 50 Cheers/Jeers
- 🟩 Net Neutrality Hot Takes
- 🟥 What's Next For Nintendo?

Wasteland Weapons

In issue 299, we asked readers what would be their video game weapon of choice in a real-life post-apocalyptic wasteland. Forget the fact that the question makes no sense and read the responses already, will ya?

I'd go with the infinite-ammo SMG from Resident Evil 2. I love that game and that gun – who cares if it turns your final game score to a "B" instead of an "A?"

Andrew Newsham

I'd choose the Staff of Conjuring from WoW. I highly doubt I'd survive long in a post-apocalyptic word, but conjuring bread every five minutes sure would get me farther than I'd ever hope. Plus, think of the bartering possibilities!

Derek Jackson

I'd have to go with Samus Aran's arm cannon from the Phazon Suit … unless the whole suit counts as a weapon?

Elijah Alexander

My weapon for the post-apocalypse would be any of the guns from Ratchet & Clank that turn your enemies into farm animals. Then no one would have to starve, and it wouldn't count as cannibalism!

Jeff Ambrose

I would choose Doom's BFG just because nobody would dare get in my way. Mwah ha ha!

George Magembe

Cappy from Super Mario Odyssey!

Petar Petrov

(Left) Our photo tour of D.I.C.E. 2018 begins with writer Ben Silverman, Capybara's Nathan Vella, Upload's Tal Blevins, Fortyseven Communication's Sibel Sunar, and ID@Xbox director Chris Charla. **(Right)** It wouldn't be a D.I.C.E. summit without AIAS president Meggan Scavio, posing here with StudioMDHR's Maja Moldenhauer.

(continued on page 10)

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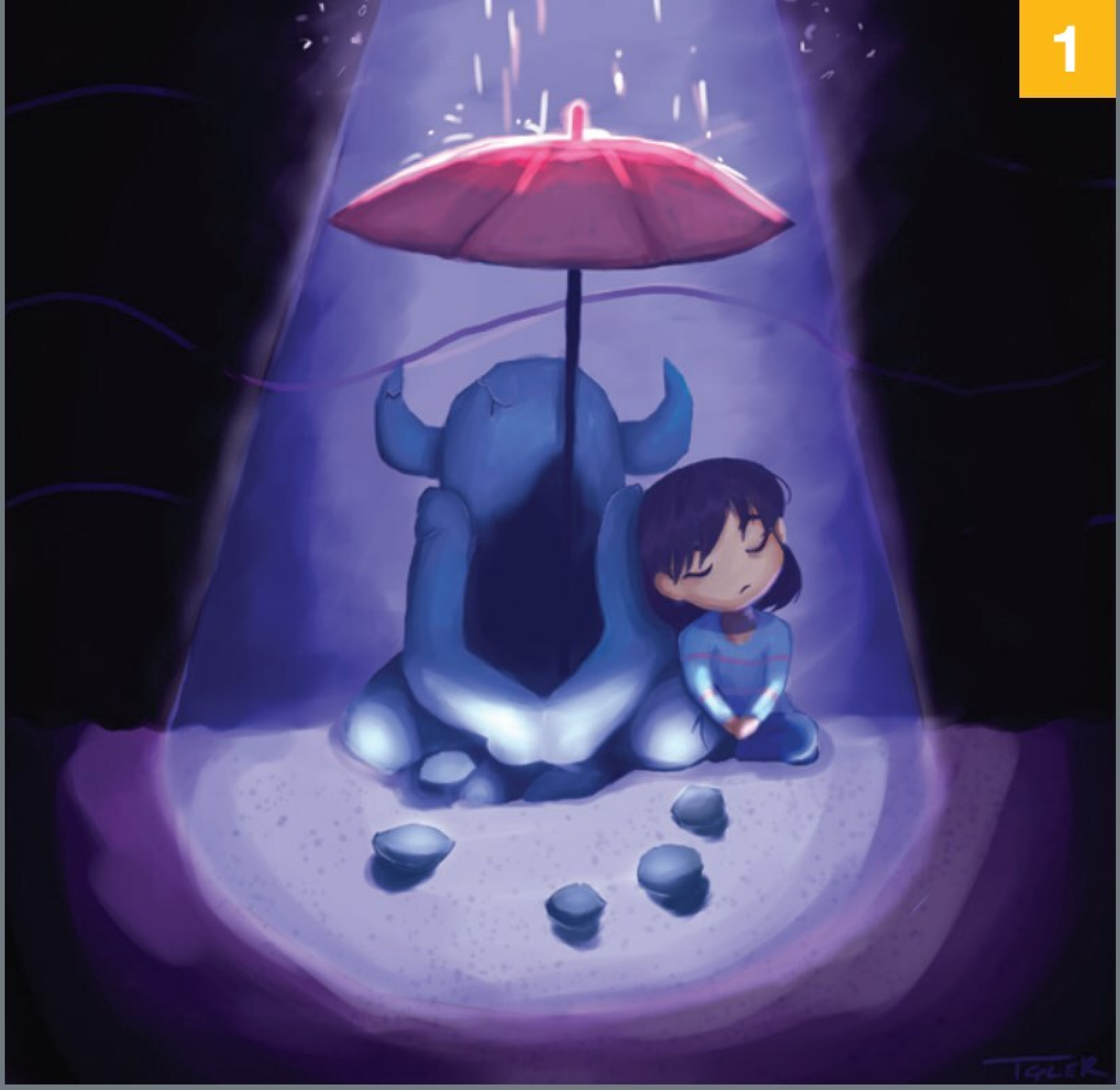
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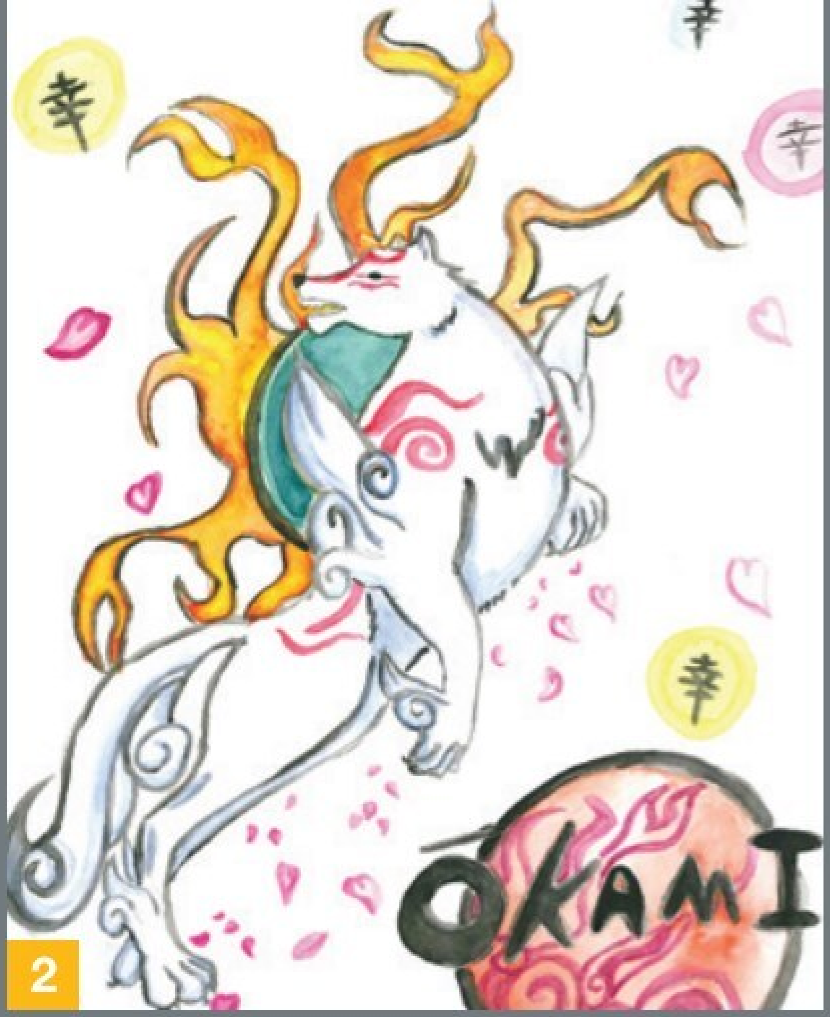

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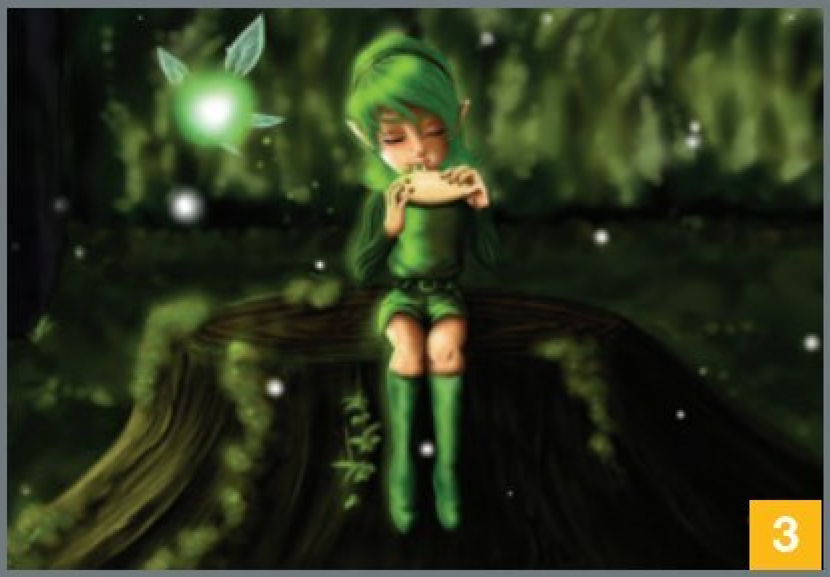
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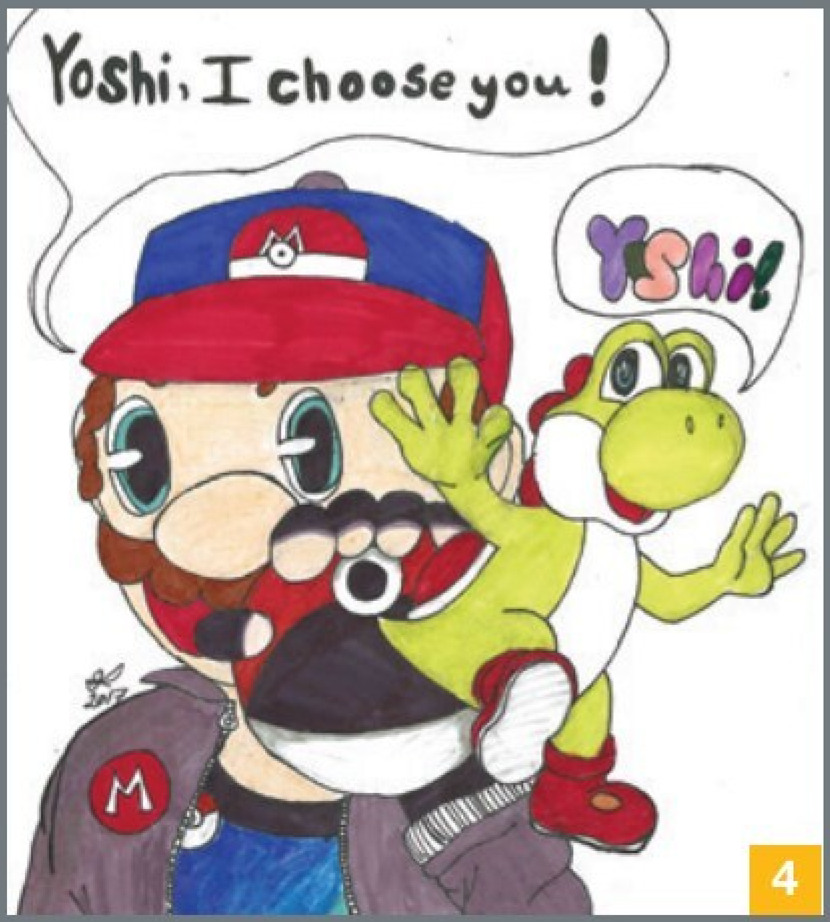
Yoshi, I choose you!
Yoshi!
4

WINNER

1 Tyler Lee

Capturing an audio puzzle in image form isn't easy, but you don't have to be a huge Undertale fan to appreciate Tyler's work.

2 Lindsay Kelley

Few games have spawned more reader art than Okami over the years, but you can't argue with the results.

3 Claudia Brown

We're not Saria to feature this Zelda-inspired artwork. Get it? Moving on…

4 Julie Lessner

Just when you thought Mario and Yoshi's relationship couldn't get any weirder…

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(Left) Double Fine's Greg Rice, Riot Games' Seth Killian, Annapurna Interactive's Nathan Gary, and Media Molecule's Abbie Heppe were also enjoying the festivities. **(Right)** Magic Leap's Aleissia Laidacker (right) was on hand to congratulate 2018's Randy Pausch scholarship winner, River Liu. Congratulations, River!

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365 Days Of Switch

Looking back at the first year of Nintendo's new console

by Ben Reeves

Nintendo's fortunes took a bleak turn last generation. The Wii U featured a novel, oversized controller with a built-in touchscreen and a small library of quality games, but left many consumers confused and mistaking the new system for an add-on to the wildly successful Wii. The system's underpowered hardware and lack of third-party development didn't help either. Ultimately, Nintendo's touchscreen experiment became the company's least successful hardware since the Virtual Boy in 1995. The stakes for the future had never been higher.

To some, the Switch didn't look like the game-changer Nintendo needed to reverse course. The system was still underpowered compared to other consoles on the market, its internal battery only lasted around three hours, and the tiny Joy-Con controllers were a pain to use separately. The Switch refined the Wii U's promise of playing a game on both your TV or in your hands, but some worried that it would also emulate the Wii U's blunders.

A year after its introduction, we know Nintendo had nothing to fear. The Switch smashed projections, selling over 4.8 million units in the U.S. and more than double that worldwide in just 10 months, breaking even with the original Wii's record for year-one sales. It took the Wii U more than five years to sell its 13.5 million units, something the Switch did in less than a year. To get a better overview of the Switch's first year, we chronicled the several things Nintendo did right with its newest console.

PORTABILITY WITHOUT COMPROMISES

The video game industry has long been fascinated with taking console games on the go. In 1995, Sega released the Genesis Nomad, a portable handheld that played Genesis cartridges. Unfortunately, the Nomad ate through six AA batteries in about two hours and was a financial flop. More recently, Sony's Vita had a robust library of cross-play titles and allowed users to play PS3 and PS4 consoles remotely over Wi-Fi – if they could put up with the stuttering frame rates. Nintendo's Switch succeeds where other portable console hybrids faltered because playing games in the Switch's handheld mode doesn't feel like a compromise. Many Switch titles look like the kind of big-budget titles you would want to play on your TV, and, in some cases, they look even better on the Switch's built-in screen. Nintendo said we'd be able to play Switch games anytime, anywhere, and with anyone, and it made good on that promise.

TWO BIRDS WITH ONE CONSOLE

We loved the idea of playing our console games on the bus, but we didn't realize how often we'd actually go portable until we held a Switch in our hands. According to Nintendo's own data, around 30 percent of Switch owners use the console primarily as portable device, while just under 20 percent play games exclusively in docked mode. Meanwhile, over 50 percent of Switch owners regularly swap between docked and portable modes. The Switch's flexibility appeals to both the console and handheld markets, but Nintendo has created a sizeable third market of people interested in having the flexibility of a handheld and the comfort of a console in a single system. Nintendo is the only hardware company actively exploring this segment of the market. In this sense, the Switch has no competition.

TOP TIER FIRST-PARTY LINEUP

The Switch's day-one launch library looked a little thin, but after we'd invested more than a hundred hours into The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Nintendo was rolling out more games like Splatoon 2, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, and Arms. Nintendo aimed to have at least one significant Switch product each month, which created a drip feed of good games. The publisher capped off 2017 with releases like Super Mario Odyssey and Xenoblade Chronicles 2, giving the Switch what is one of the most impressive year-one libraries in history.

FAMILY FRIENDLY

Like Disney, Nintendo sees itself as a wholesome, family-friendly company, but this doesn't limit its audience. Blockbuster franchises like Mario and Zelda rope in the hardcore gaming crowd while titles like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and Snipperclipers appeal to those looking for lighthearted social experiences. Even the Switch's price tag makes it more attractive to families with fixed budgets. Nintendo launched the Switch at $299, which is $100 less than the launch price for Sony's PS4, and $200 cheaper than the current price of Microsoft's Xbox One X. Of course, the price for Sony and Microsoft's base systems have come down since their launch, but the fact that the Switch launched at a lower price allowed it to remain competitive at retail.

REINVIGORATED THIRD-PARTY INTEREST

Ubisoft was one of the first major third-party publishers to embrace development of new games on the Switch. Despite initial skepticism, Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle earned critical praise for its surprisingly deep XCOM-style strategy. Thankfully, the Switch's success has also attracted developers like Rockstar Games and Bethesda, who hadn't released games on Nintendo platforms in years. Within the span of one week in November, the Switch received ports of Doom (2016), L.A. Noire, and Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. The Wii U had similar early support and received ports for games like Assassin's Creed III, Darksiders II, Batman: Arkham City, and Mass Effect 3, but that support quickly tapered off after the first year. Given the Switch's current sales trajectory, hopefully that won't happen this time around.

INDIE GAME HAVEN

Indie developers – who haven't been restricted by the console's hardware specs – flocked to the Switch and helped fill the holes in the Switch's library with titles like Stardew Valley, Steamworld Dig 2, Golf Story, Celeste, Battle Chef Brigade, Night in the Woods, Axiom Verge, Overcooked, Darkest Dungeon, and Shovel Knight. While many of these titles are already years old, indie developers discovered Switch editions sometimes outsold other platforms. This indie boom is likely a result of the fact that Switch owners are hungry for fresh content, but we hope Nintendo continues to foster these relationships, and that the Switch remains an outlet for exciting and original indie projects. ◆

TIVAL
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TAXI

Switch Perfect

How Nintendo's little console needs to improve

by Ben Reeves

Nintendo's Switch is lighting up the sales charts, but we're not ready to let Nintendo off the hook for some of the console's weaknesses. The Switch's second year will be as important as its first, so Nintendo wants to continue its momentum. Here are six things it should do to make the Switch better in 2018.

KEEP PUBLISHING GREAT GAMES

This is obvious, but Switch owners have reason to be worried about the 2018 calendar. Last year, Nintendo pulled out all the stops with great games like Super Mario Odyssey, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, and Splatoon 2. This blitz was important for getting the new console off the ground, but that means Nintendo's internal teams might be playing catch-up this year. We know the publisher is priming Metroid Prime 4 and a new Pokémon game, but those titles likely won't be ready before 2019. This means that the biggest games on the horizon are Bayonetta 3 and a new Mario Tennis, which might not be enough to appease hungry fans. Re-releasing Wii U hits like Super Smash Bros. could help fill this void, but we hope Nintendo also has a few new surprises up its sleeve.

CONTINUE TO COURT THIRD-PARTY PUBLISHERS

Another solution to filling the gaps in the Switch's game calendar would be to invest in third-party development. Nintendo has frequently struggled to encourage other companies to develop for its consoles, but it has better leverage now that the Switch is a hit. We'd like to see more gems from previous generations follow the lead of games like Skyrim and L.A. Noire. Capcom plans to port Mega Man 11, while Sega is making a Switch version of Valkyria Chronicles 4, but Nintendo's console is significantly underpowered compared to the PS4 and Xbox One. This means that triple-A titles like Far Cry 5 and Red Dead Redemption 2 are unlikely ports.

MAKE ONLINE A PRIORITY

Before the Switch launched, Nintendo teased a paid online service similar to the PlayStation Network and Xbox Live. The service was originally set to debut last fall, but was pushed out to next September. We know this online plan will cost $19.99 per year, will be required to play online games, and will give subscribers access to a rotating back catalog of Nintendo games that have been updated with new features like leaderboards and multiplayer. Our biggest concern is that Nintendo isn't

NINTENDO SWITCH™

investing in the infrastructure necessary to allow for smooth online play and other important features like voice chat and messaging. For Splatoon 2, Nintendo introduced a chat headset adapter that offloaded voice chat onto a smartphone app, which didn't alleviate our fears. When it finally launches, we hope Nintendo's online services allows Switch owners to automatically download game updates, provide access to early game demos, and introduce some kind of achievement system.

GET OUR HEAD IN THE CLOUD

If you've ever had to send your Switch into Nintendo for repair, there is a good chance you lost all the data on your device. Nintendo makes it incredibly hard to transfer data from one Switch to another. A cloud-save system would not only alleviate our fears of losing the hundreds of hours we put into The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, but would also make it easier for players to upgrade their hardware when Nintendo inevitably provides a system refresh sometime down the road.

GIVE US SOME APPS

If you browse the PlayStation 4 or Xbox One online stores, you'll find heaps of apps that give players access to thousands of movies, music, television, anime, and sports. The Switch online marketplace has Hulu. Netflix is arguably the most important entertainment provider in the world and it's completely absent from Nintendo's current platform. Unfortunately, Netflix doesn't seem too interested. "In the case of the Switch, they [Nintendo] were very focused at launch not on video-use cases, but on gaming cases, video was not a priority for them," said Netflix executive Scott Mirer during a recent press Q&A panel in Silicon Valley. "Whether that changes over time, we have a great relationship with them and look at the possibility of the Switch. We each have opportunity cost around that, but at some point, it might happen." This means Nintendo might have to do some work to entice these service providers over to its systems. After all, apps like Amazon Prime, HBO Go, YouTube, Twitch, and Spotify would give us many more reasons to pick up Nintendo mobile hardware.

LET PLAYERS GET FRIENDLY

These days, players are used to exchanging gamertags so they can connect online later for multiplayer hijinks. Nintendo expects us to remember a friend code that's longer than our social security number. Admittedly, the Switch makes it easier to befriend players than previous Nintendo systems, but the friend code system still feels needlessly archaic. Alongside Nintendo' online plan, Nintendo should release an update that lets users create a unique online username and allow player to send messages back and forth – something Xbox owners have been doing since 2002. ◆

Playing With Cardboard

Hands-on with Nintendo's video game/crafting hybrid

by Kyle Hilliard

Labo is among Nintendo's strangest products, which is saying a lot for a company that tried to launch a virtual reality console in 1996 with the Virtual Boy. The reaction to Labo's announcement has included anger, excitement, and polite dismissal, but at the very least everyone has questions about the weird cardboard craft/video game hybrid. To answer some of those questions, we went hands-on with Labo, building Toy-Cons, playing the games, and customizing our creations.

To help me test out Labo, which from the start has been pitched as product for kids, I brought one with me. My kindergartner daughter joined me on my trip to give you two perspectives: one from the jaded video game journalist, and one from Labo's target demographic.

BUILDING

We started with the Toy-Con RC Car, which is one of the simplest builds. It only took a few minutes to assemble, and the cardboard surprised me in two ways. It's thinner than I thought it would be, but it is also more durable. As you pop out the pieces from the template, you end up with little scrap pieces that can be thrown away. Both my daughter and I tried our best to rip those scraps into smaller pieces. We were both able to do it, but not without some effort.

The RC Car looks nothing like a car, and instead resembles a squat caterpillar. Once you build it, the left and right Joy-Cons slot into the sides and you can use an application on the Switch screen to individually vibrate each controller to move the RC Car around with decent precision. You can also turn on the controller's IR camera, which delivers a night vision video feed to the screen to act as a remote camera. You can even set up special IR markers that the RC Car can chase.

We moved on to the fishing pole next. The tutorial estimated the build time to be over an hour, and I found its more complicated construction to be more interesting than the simple car. The walkthrough on the Switch's screen shows an animated step-by-step process with a 3D model you can zoom in on and rotate. Some steps are obvious, like pre-folding every crease. Thankfully an option to fast-forward through those steps exists. It got complicated to the point that my daughter lost interest and eagerly skipped to the optional customization portion of the build, but the tutorials are well done and feature intuitive playback controls.

CUSTOMIZATION

Much like Legos, I enjoyed the building part of the Labo process the most. The act of following directions, folding the cardboard, locking in tabs, and ending up with something I could hold in my hand was satisfying. All my daughter wanted to do, however, was color and decorate the creations. She would steal the components away from me as I built them, color them, and return them. Coloring is a staple in our household, but I think the prospect of coloring a 3D object made it more exciting for her.

PLAYING

I didn't have time to complete the fishing pole, but my daughter colored the incomplete Toy-Con, covered it in stickers, and even taped M&M candies to it (for the pretend fish to eat, I assume). Nintendo did have pre-built Toy-Cons available to test, however, so we got to play with everything.

Fishing

The thing that struck me about the fishing game was how well the motion controls work. We all remember the hit or miss nature of the Wii remotes, but Nintendo improved the tech a great deal for the Switch. Catching fish and rapidly winding the cardboard reel was responsive and neat. You can keep your caught fish in an aquarium, but it's unclear if there is a deeper, enticing loop to encourage replayability.

Racing

The motorcycle handlebars Toy-Con features a racing game, the option to make your

own tracks, and a mode where you chase down targets. Looking at the screen embedded in the handlebars while I steered with motion controls, surprisingly, reminded me of VR experiences.

The House
Arguably the most abstract of the Toy-Cons, the house features slots that react differently depending on which cardboard pieces are inserted into them. Two pieces connected by a string, for example, created portals that could send things from one side of the house to the other, while another shaped like a button kicked off a Donkey Kong Country-style mine cart minigame where you pushed on the side of the house to make the mine cart jump.

The Piano
The most versatile of the Toy-Cons, different cardboard inserts would change the piano's sounds. You could also rotate the inserts to bend the pitch, or press a built-in record button to save your compositions. The piano also had an acoustic mode where pressing different keys on the piano would make the left Joy-Con vibrate at different pitches.

The Robot
Strings attached to your hands and feet correspond to a series of pulleys in the backpack that are watched by the Joy-Con's IR camera. All of that translates into a destructive on-screen robot. Despite the unwieldy nature of essentially strapping a puppeteering contraption to the back of a small child, this was my daughter's favorite. From the jaded journalist perspective, however, I was reminded of poor Kinect experiences. It was more responsive than Kinect, though, thanks to being able to physically manipulate something attached to my hands and feet.

Price And Release

Three Labo products will be available on April 20. The Variety Kit ($69.99) features the RC car, piano, fishing pole, house, and motorcycle handlebars. The Robot Kit ($79.99) features the robot backpack kit. Finally, the Customization Kit ($9.99) includes two stencil sheets, two sticker sheets, and two rolls of tape.

PROGRAMMING

Though we didn't get to play with it ourselves, Nintendo showed off the Toy-Con Garage, which has incredible creative potential. It is essentially a visual programming language that lets players control every function of the Switch with "if-then" statements. One block, for example, can say "When you press the A button…" while another block can say "…vibrate the left Joy-Con" and then you can connect those two blocks with a line so when you press A the left Joy-Con vibrates. That's a simple example, but the options go far deeper. When you apply those capabilities to physical pieces of cardboard, I see the potential for an inventive community coming up with impressive creations.

Spending time with Labo didn't change my perspective too much. I still love how bizarre the whole concept is, and building the Toy-Cons gave me the same kind of enjoyable father-daughter playtime I get from building Legos with her – another activity she often leaves for me to finish on my own. The completed creations feel more like toys than video games (which isn't necessarily a bad thing) and I was impressed with their durability (though they will still succumb to the errant adult foot). The future of Labo, though, belongs to the Toy-Con Garage tinkerers. More than even playing with creations on my own, I want to see what people do with those tools.

A Game-Changing Bucket List

Fighting cancer through video games and friendship

by Elise Favis

Video games are powerful. They bring us together in unexpected ways, sparking friendships or offering escapism in times of distress. For young adults Chris Betancourt and Dillon Hill, games not only endeared them to each other as kids, but also offered them a newfound source of strength to fight cancer, start a game-centric charity together, and create a bucket list that would inspire thousands.

Betancourt and Hill have been best friends since middle school. When Betancourt was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia in fifth grade, Hill loyally visited him in the hospital each day to enjoy games like James Bond 007: Nightfire and Age of Empires together, escaping the morose reality of Betancourt's diagnosis. After several experimental treatments, Betancourt eventually entered remission and returned to a mostly normal life. Little did they know that his cancer would ferociously return years later.

Late last year, at age 20, Betancourt discovered he now has a mutated strain of cancer that's resilient to most medications. Without a bone-marrow transplant, the doctors said he would have only a year to live. Rather than give up hope, the two sat down to create an uplifting list.

"The first few days [after news of my returned cancer,] I was just destroyed – I was not there," Betancourt says. "[Dillon] would tell me 'Give me 50 things you're going to put down for a bucket list, and we're going to do them.' At the time, I didn't think much of it. But I started writing them down and eventually, it started getting really fun. It's been a really good thing to get me out of my slump."

Hill dropped out of college to focus on helping his best friend. The bucket list now has more than 100 entries, with several video game-related listings like getting matching Tetris tattoos to represent gaming in their friendship, playing PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds with Terry Crews, as well as meeting famous YouTube personalities like TotalBiscuit and iDubbbz. The two have since gotten their tattoos, flown a plane, had a pillow fight with strangers at Reddit headquarters, fed the homeless, and more – but they've barely dented the massive list.

The list has gained worldwide media attention, with both Betancourt and Hill making appearances on shows like *Good Morning America*, *Nightline*, and YouTube's Good Mythical Morning. The two are grateful for the attention it's garnered, and hope that the popularity can help them find

Chris and Dillon have so far checked off bucket-list items like feeding the homeless, flying a plane, and having a pillow fight with strangers

Looking For A Match

In his race against time, Chris Betancourt hopes to find bone marrow donor with the help of Be The Match, the world's largest registry of volunteer bone marrow donors. The Minneapolis-based organization, which has provided 86,000 marrow transplants since its inception in 1987, took special interest in Betancourt after coming across his bucket list website. Since then, Be The Match's marketing sector teamed up with Hill and Betancourt, helping them gain media attention to bring their story to a wider audience.

Despite these efforts, Betancourt is still without a bone marrow donor. To donate, you must be without any infectious diseases and have never had a previous bone marrow transplant. A simple cheek swab can let the organization know if you're a match for a corresponding patient. If you're eligible, you can go through one of two procedures without paying a cent: a peripheral blood stem cell donation that requires you to go to a blood center for several hours, or a bone marrow donation. The latter is a surgical procedure, but director of community engagement Mary Halet explains that it is safe and "pretty uneventful."

"The donor is asleep. It's done through general anesthesia, so they don't even know that it's happening," she says.

In 2017 alone, 493,000 new potential donors were added to the registry, with 35 percent of them having diverse ancestry. Be The Match has over 19 million registry members in total, and continues to grow today.

A bone marrow transplant could save Bentacourt's life. If you want to help him and find out if you're qualified to donate, head to join.bethematch.org/mybestfriend.

Chris was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia and needs a bone-marrow transplant to survive

a bone-marrow donor for Betancourt. Hill's hopes that creating memories and a legacy for his best friend will in turn inspire others.

"Obviously, we're trying to turn this into something where we can build up the momentum to find Chris a bone-marrow donor and eventually save his life, because the internet is just an amazing thing," Hill says. "But, if we can't do that, and he does pass within the next year, we have this entire story of that year. It's really important to me that we film everything because it's going to be the best closure I can possibly have. I hope to turn it into a legacy for him."

Betancourt needs a donor who is nearly a genetic match in order to survive. The volunteer would need the same blood type, similar racial background, and even small details like the same hair color. Since Betancourt is Puerto Rican, finding a suitable match has proven difficult. "Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico, so there are a lot [fewer] people, as well," he says. "They're still building up infrastructure and finding missing people."

Founding An Organization Together

Aside from searching for a donor and working their way through the bucket list, Hill and Betancourt also created a gaming non-profit organization called Gamers Gift. This charity brings the virtual-reality headset HTC Vive to people with disabilities, those confined to assisted-living facilities, and patients who are in extended hospital stays in order to improve their quality of life and provide distraction.

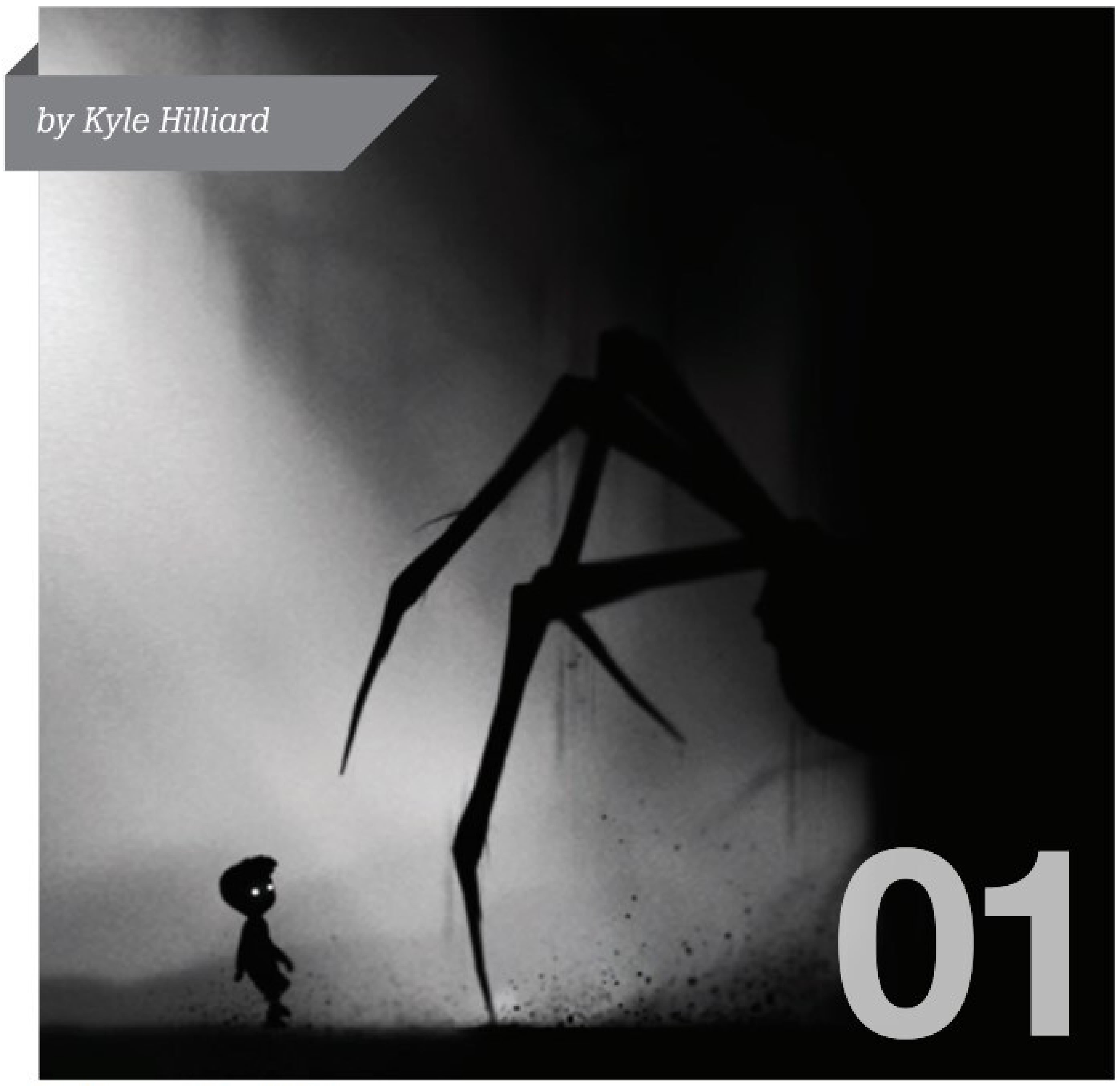
"If I go back into the hospital, I have my own VR setup and computer," Betancourt says. "I can do that, but there's a lot of people paying thousands for medical bills. Luckily, I have good medical coverage. But for the people paying thousands, they can't even begin to think about paying for a VR headset."

Gamers Gift has been relatively successful, with Bentacourt and Hill saying that they've helped thousands of patients. An impressive list of sponsors, including Valve to Asus, have provided PCs and VR equipment so the team can continue bringing hope to others. The organization was gearing up for a charity convention called GG:WP, but due to financial constraints, Gamers Gift has postponed the event for the time being.

Hill and Betancourt have a lot of work ahead of them, and despite the uncertain future, the two hold their heads high with renewed strength. "We want to convey the message that you don't have to be dying of cancer to experience something incredible," Dillon says. "Even though our circumstances are pretty dark, you don't need dark circumstances to enjoy life."

SPIDERS, MAN

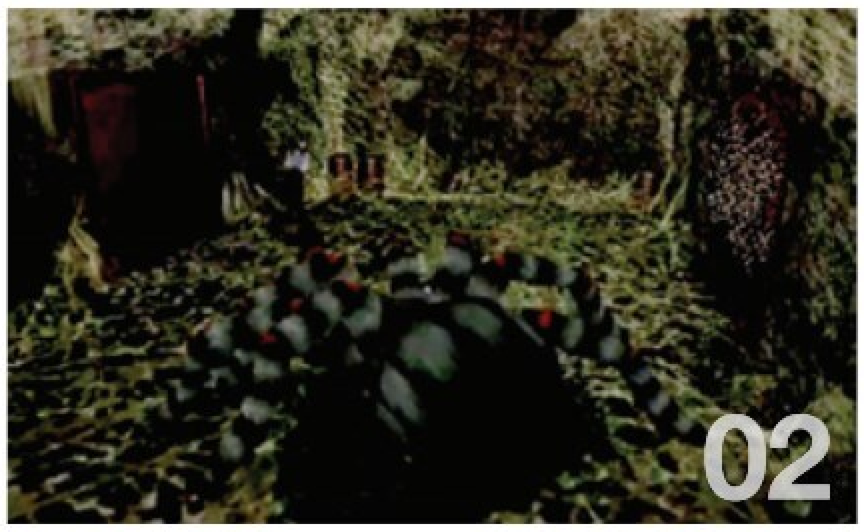
by Kyle Hilliard



The Spider

Limbo

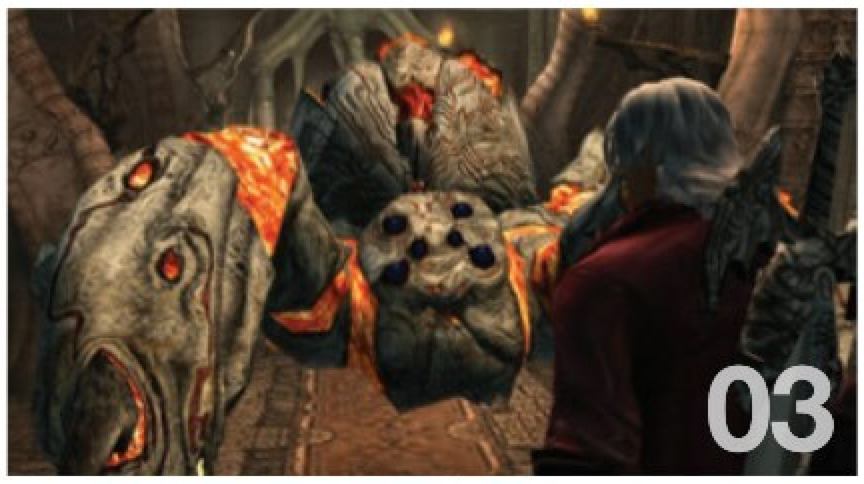
Spiders, man. They're the worst, right? But this is a list of the best, and as far as video game spiders go, it's hard to think of a more memorable arachnid than the one from Limbo. It follows you through a large portion of the game, and even after defeating it, you still have to pull off its legs in an undeniably horrific display.



Black Tiger

Resident Evil

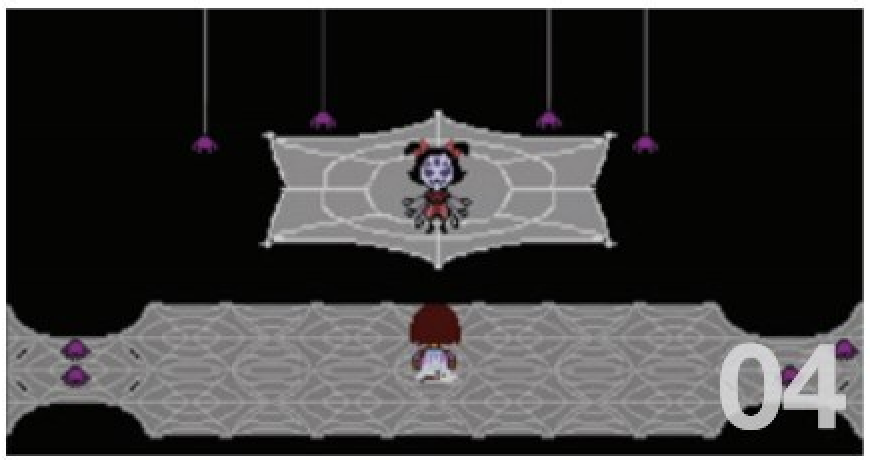
Resident Evil is a game about zombies, which makes the sudden appearance of a gigantic, realistic spider all the more surprising and terrifying. In the original Resident Evil you only encounter one Black Tiger, but later entries reveal there are plenty more.



Phantom

Devil May Cry

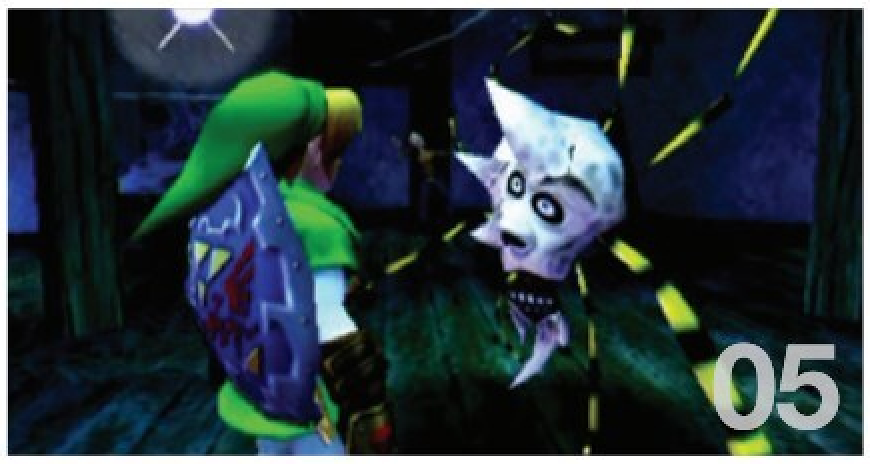
Phantom is one of two spiders on this list that has lava spewing from its joints. To make matters worse, it threatens to crush you like an ant, which seems rude considering spiders and ants are practically cousins. It also has a scorpion tail for some reason.



Muffet

Undertale

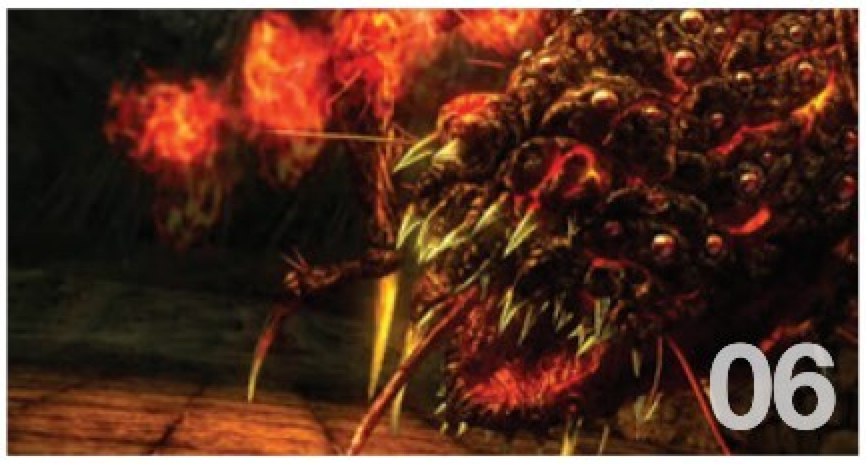
Muffet is a generally good-natured spider who runs a bake sale raising the necessary funds to help free her fellow spiders from the Ruins. She puts up a fight, but if you hold out long enough and prove you don't hate spiders, she will let you go.



The Father Of The Cursed Family

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

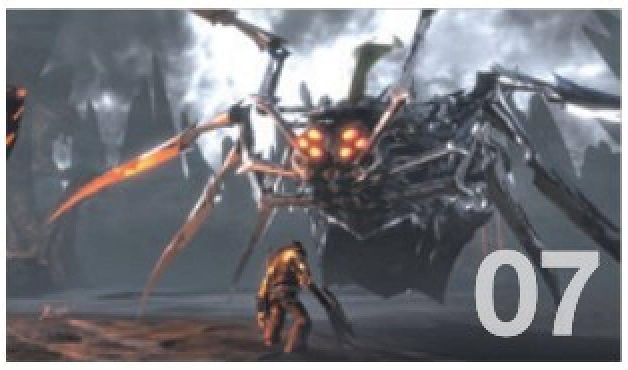
One of Ocarina of Time's largest side quests involves killing and collecting tokens from Gold Skulltalas. They're creepy on their own thanks to their telltale scratching, but they're attractive compared to the once wealthy family burdened by their curse.



Chaos Witch Quelaag

Dark Souls

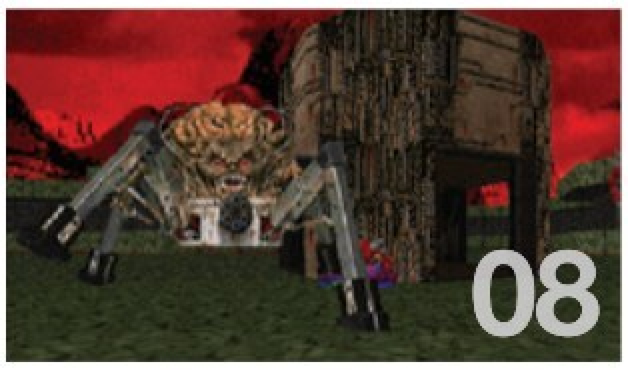
Of all the spiders in Dark Souls – and there are plenty – Quelaag stands as the most horrifying of the universe thanks to lava attacks, and being half-human. You don't earn a prefix like Chaos Witch without taking the necessary steps needed to earn it.



The Metal Queen Chrome Recluse

Brütal Legend

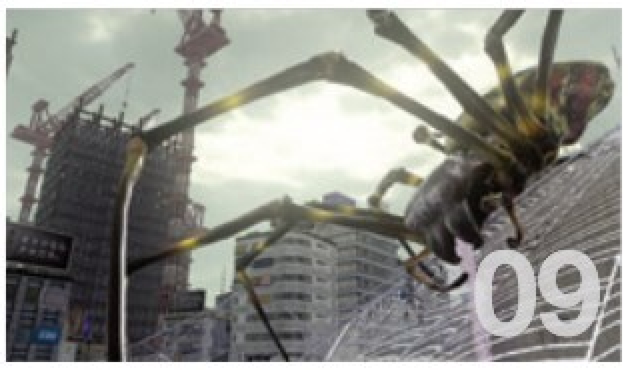
Brütal Legend's world is full of terrifying monsters, but the Metal Queen has eight legs, is made of metal (surprise!), and can shoot acid. People also tend to leave her alone because they don't want to get bitten in half and have their eye sockets filled with spider eggs.



Spider Mastermind

Doom

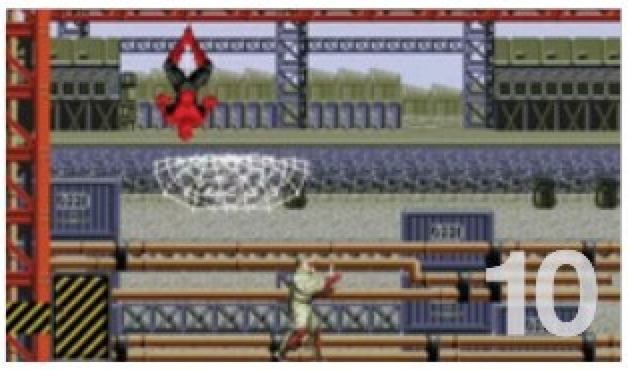
The Spider Mastermind is the final boss of Doom. She moves fast despite her massive size and shoots lasers like a disco ball. Killing her is a satisfying conclusion to Doom's hellish journey.



Spiders

Earth Defense Force 2017

Many of the entries on this list point to a singular, specific spider within a video game universe, but in Earth Defense Force, you encounter hundreds of these eight-legged monstrosities. Each and every one of them is made of nightmares.



Web-bat

The Revenge of Shinobi

Sure, this "spider" only has half the necessary appendages to be considered a spider, but there is something undeniably spider-y about him that we just can't put our finger on. Maybe it's all of his web-based attacks? In any case, calling him a spider just feels right. ◆

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Only at Walmart

Retro Concepts Revived With New Twists

The indie scene is rife with creators inspired by the games they played when they were younger. Buoyed by those memories, developers now craft projects that recall those classics, but with new dynamics that help those concepts feel fresh again. ***by Matt Miller***

Battle Princess Madelyn has a heartwarming backstory. Creative director Chris Obritsch designed the game in response to his young daughter Madeylyn's desire to be in her favorite game, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, and to help prove her wrong when she worried in response that "girls can't be knights." The resulting project recalls that old arcade-era sidescroller, but with a surprising new layer of depth.

Playing through a lengthy demo revealed the meat of the gameplay. Madelyn leaps, climbs, and flings spears at undead baddies in a way that would do old knight Arthur proud. Action and pacing likewise match the old aesthetic, as Madelyn fights her way through endlessly respawning foes to reach towering bosses, all the while trying to keep from being knocked out of her armor and into her PJs. In this arcade mode, collecting chests and killing monsters gets you new weapons and armor. "It's meant for speed runs and old school junkies," Obritsch says.

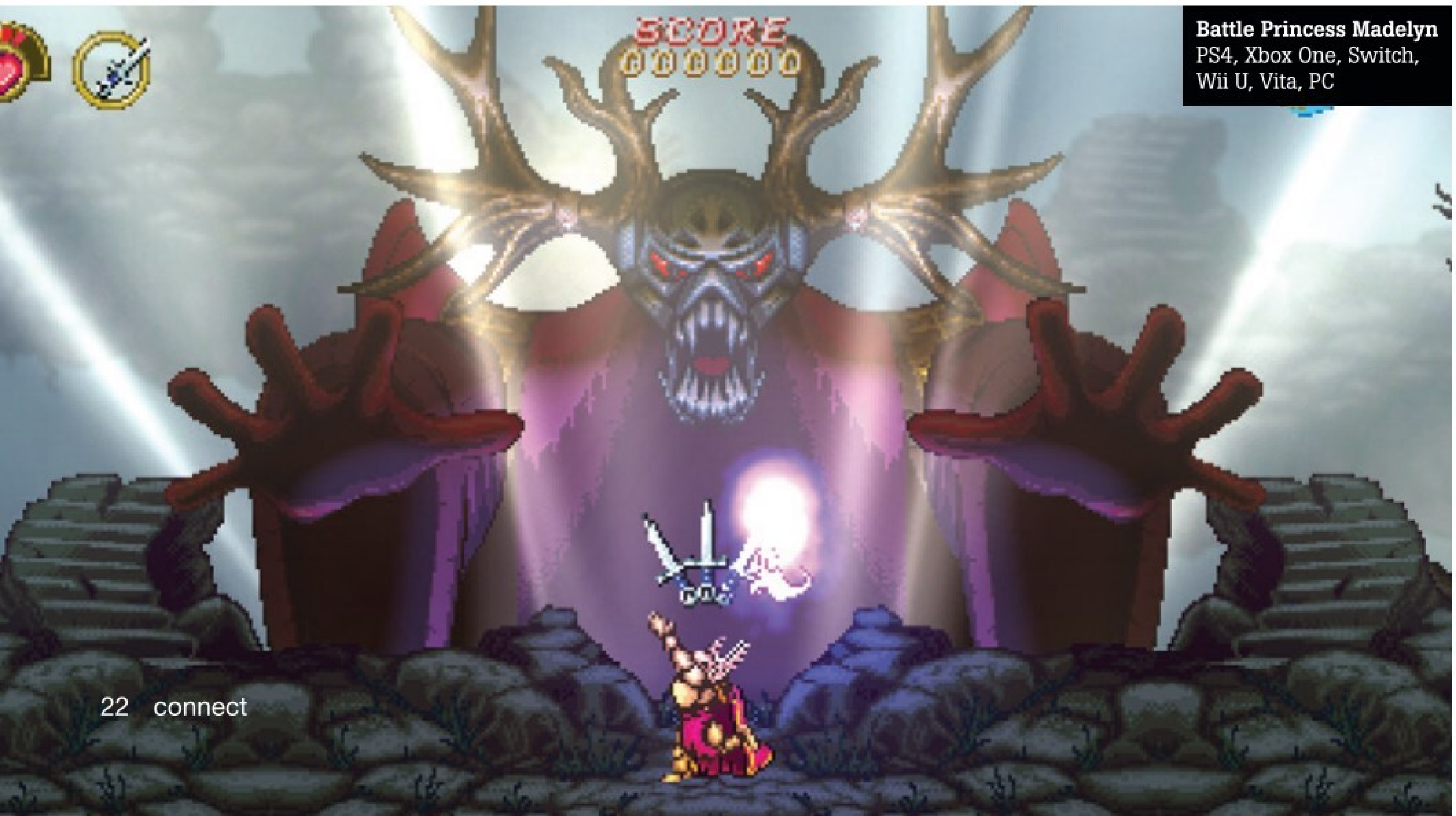
While that arcade mode should feel familiar, the story mode has a deeper loop. "The story mode is more of a Metroidvania-lite style of gameplay," Obritsch says. "A bit like Shantae, even." Players can move freely back and forth through the levels before acquiring an item that lets Madelyn travel to new locales all around the world. In story mode, players must gather hidden armor shards and bring them to a blacksmith. In turn, new armor sets change the way collected weapons behave. For instance, the wand upgrades to a three-way shot with Valkyrie armor, or chain lightning with the magic dragon armor. Madelyn's spirit dog companion Fritzy also gains new powers along the way, including the ability to possess statues, which might help solve some light puzzles that open up hidden stages.

"Story mode is teeming with side quests," Obritsch says. "The majority of which are given to the player by backer NPCs from the Kickstarter. They range anywhere from finding a lost item and clearing monsters out of an area, to saving someone or even taking down a mini boss or boss." My time with the arcade mode of play left most of those extra features out, but the gameplay fundamentals are on point. A stellar soundtrack can be played in either chiptune style or in an orchestrated version, as well. I'm excited to see how Causal Bit Games finishes out the project for a release on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Wii U, Vita, and PC in the second quarter of 2018.

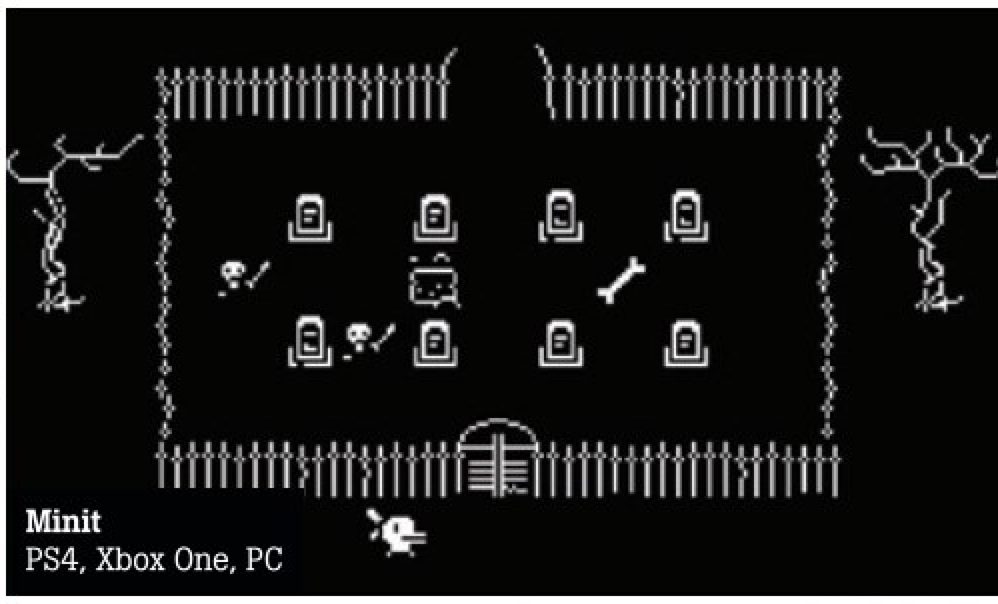
After an all-too-brief flyby of the game at E3 last year, I also got to play a bunch more of **Minit** this month. Don't let the simplistic black-and-white pixel graphics dissuade your interest, as this inventive gem is hard to put down. In a top-down view reminiscent of the original Zelda, players navigate a world that melds the fantasy action elements you'd expect with a layer of classic puzzle-based adventure gameplay. Find the watering can to slake the thirst of a lost figure in the desert, who in turn offers to take you on a boat ride, but only if you find the wood needed to repair a boat, which is located somewhere near some snakes. You get the idea.

The innovation lies in the timing required and tension built by a 60-second time limit on every life. At the beginning of the game, you pick up a cursed sword that kills you exactly one minute later. Acquired items or significant changes made to the world often persist after death, so it all becomes a matter of getting somewhere, and sometimes solving the puzzle you find there, before your brief life ends and you must start again at your house. Thankfully, entering designated new houses changes your start point, gradually allowing an ever-broadening map of exploration.

Minit is charming from the start, and the one-minute life scenario is a great hook that leads to some clever puzzles and a constant need for engagement and attention. Every life begins to emerge as its own little speed run, as you look for ways to cut corners, reach your destination in the fewest steps possible, and never waste time. Minit should launch around the same time this issue hits, so keep an eye out for it on PS4, Xbox One, and PC.



Battle Princess Madelyn
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Wii U, Vita, PC



Minit
PS4, Xbox One, PC

SUBNAUTICA

After years of development in Steam early access, Subnautica made a big splash when it finally released its 1.0 version on PC in January. With its astonishing underwater world and robust survival mechanics, we were excited to sit down with Hugh Jeremy, one of the head developers from Unknown Worlds, to discuss more about what went into Subnautica's meticulous development.

by Elise Favis

Why did you decide to put Subnautica in the Xbox Game Preview program instead of waiting to release a full, finished version?
It speaks to our development method and what's worked for us on PC and Mac. To start making a game, you have to be very confident. If you're not going to release it before it's done, you have to be very confident that it's good. I think that's a very scary thing. The Xbox One for us is uncharted territory, so getting out there into the preview program is important. We're a small team; we don't even have a formal playtest group, so we've really needed expert players to be running into all our bugs that we were accidentally putting in. If we just waited for full release, I think launch day would be a really scary, disastrous thing.

You had some great, open communication with your fans while Subnautica was in early access on PC. How did the community help shape the game to what it is now in its final version?
Our games are built in the open. There are no secrets. With [our older title] Natural Selection 2, even before it was on Steam, there were builds that you could download if you went to the right FTP. It was really archaic stuff, but we always make it possible for people to download [builds] and make it possible for people to talk to us directly to tell us what they think. With Subnautica, it's taken to an extreme because development began in 2013. We used amazing tools like Trillo, Discord, and Subnautica's experimental mode. Anyone in the world with Steam and a copy of Subnautica could, throughout development and still today, get access to the bleeding edge of our code base [in experimental mode], no matter how broken, buggy, terrible, or exciting it is.

Were there any specific biomes in Subnautica that were more exciting than others to design?
In the early days of Subnautica's development we were trying procedural generation, but these worlds were coming out kind of – they weren't sterile – but they were very consistent. They were almost homogenous; the worlds would have localized differences but as you travel through them, they didn't have these like big variances that you see in the [final] handcrafted game.

There was one that really stood out because of what it meant to development. We were trying to work out how to progress the game. How do we create worlds where we can progress a story and give the player progression in terms of what they're crafting and stuff without just going endlessly horizontally and deeper? The idea [that came out of that] was Lava Zone. The idea was that you would progress beneath the ocean floor. Lava Zone was really that core idea of how we get that progression.

Subnautica was unexpectedly scary, especially when you venture out at night. Was that horror aspect intentional?
It was so accidental [laughs]. For Charlie Cleveland, our game director and co-founder, his vision for the game has always been that it would be suitable for children. Charlie's vision at the start of development was hugely influenced by [the Sandy Hook shooting]. As a team, we don't believe that violent video games cause this stuff to happen or that there's even a link. However, we wanted to create an experience in video games that was something other than using firearms to blow stuff up. From the start, this was supposed to be a game suitable for children – and then horror happens!

You could give a million different answers as to how it happened, but maybe one answer would be [it happened] naturally. When you build an alien underwater world, you touch on a lot of the real human fears of the underwater; sort of evolved fears that a lot of humans tend to have or humans that haven't spent a lot of time in the ocean – which is a lot of us – of being underwater. Then, you combine those with the extraterrestrial, and then you combine those with the survival aspect, and you get horror.

INTO THE DEAD
KILL ZOMBIES. WIN CASH.
RESULT
TOP 5

Gambling On Games

Searching for a younger audience, casinos embrace skill-based gaming

by Matt Bertz

Over the past several decades, casinos have been extremely successful in rebranding themselves as entertainment destinations outside of their core gambling endeavors. Celebrity chef-driven restaurants, spring break style pool parties, and performer residencies with millennial talent like Britney Spears and Lady Gaga (who starts her two-year Vegas stint in December) have helped modernize the entertainment capital of the world and keep new generations of people coming to Sin City.

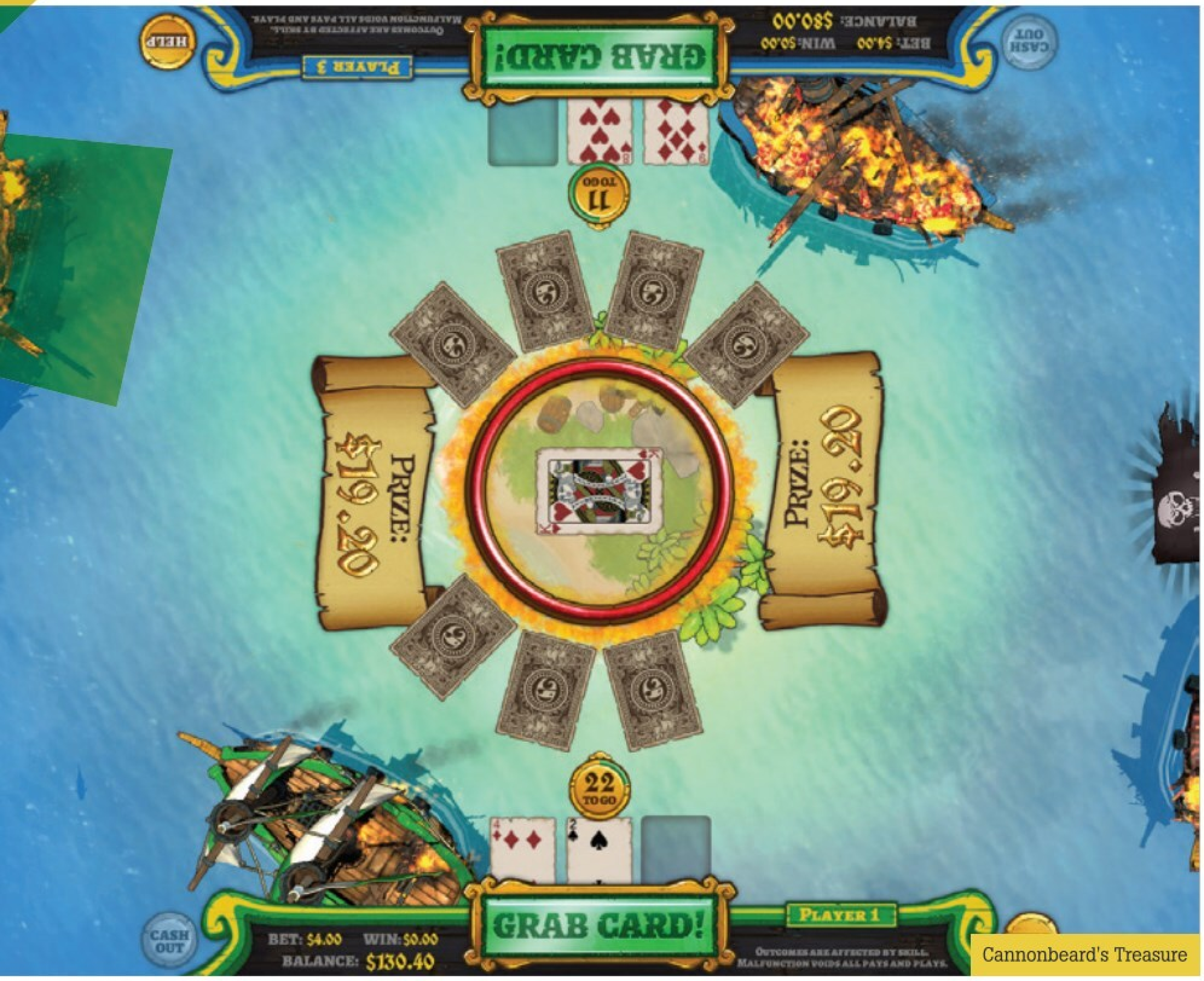
Amidst all the transformation, one area of the casino has remained stagnant: casino floors. Slot machines may receive glitzy licensed facelifts, and the number of poker or craps tables may fluctuate based on demand, but for the most part this area has stubbornly clung to games of chance from the past. Keenly aware of this fact, several companies like Gamblit Gaming are positioning themselves to transform this highly coveted floor space with one not-so-secret weapon: video games.

"Slot machines have gotten bigger brands and better screens, but the gameplay is still sitting there hitting one button, right?" says Gamblit Gaming chief marketing officer Darion Lowenstein. "It just completely misses our generation. Which is why when you look at the demographics that have been released, of people 21 to 35 who visit casinos, only two percent play slot machines. That's nothing."

Working alongside developers with established brands, Gamblit Gaming is introducing new skill-based games to casino floors in hopes of engaging the audience of twenty somethings that normally cruises right past the banks of slot machines on their way to the club. Putting their own money on the line, players can earn rewards for completing variable challenges in the games that are layered on top of the base experience. Depending on how much you bet and how many of these challenges you can accomplish on a single playthrough, you can earn cash rewards in both single-player and versus games. "Your skill directly influences your cash outcome," Lowenstein says.

The brands partnering with Gamblit should be instantly recognizable to anyone who has played mobile phone games in the past decade. Heavy hitters like Jetpack Joyride, Cut The Rope, Doodle Jump, Into the Dead, and Catapult King have all signed up to offer these skill-based challenges via Gamblit's touchscreen stations.

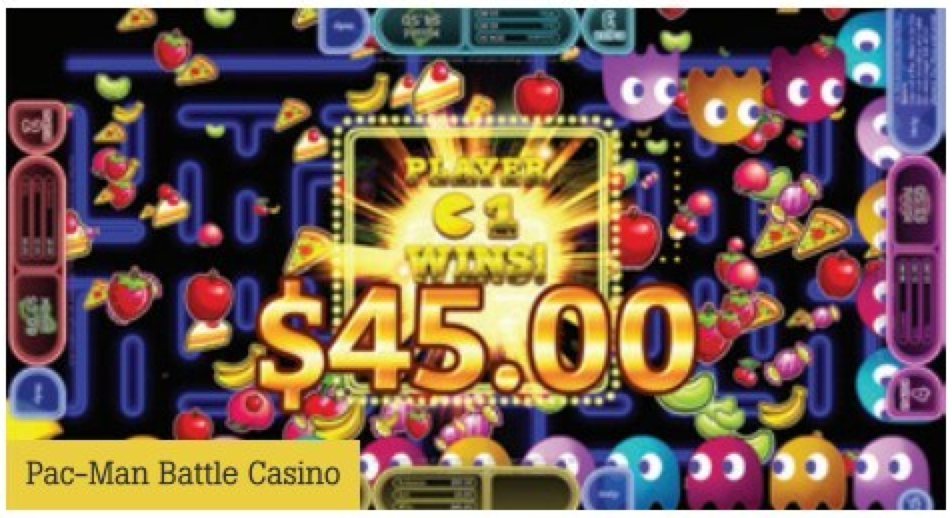
Gamblit started rolling out these


GRAB CARD!
PLAYER 1
PLAYER 3
PRIZE: $19.20
PRIZE: $19.20
22 TO GO
11 TO GO
BET: $4.00
WIN: $0.00
BALANCE: $130.40
BALANCE: $80.00
CASH OUT
HELP
OUTCOMES ARE AFFECTED BY SKILL.
MALFUNCTION VOIDS ALL PAYS AND PLAYS.

Cannonbeard's Treasure

$64
$17.38
GRAB CARD

Deal or No Deal Poker Special


PLAYER C1 WINS!
$45.00

Pac-Man Battle Casino

Jetpack Joyride

systems in casinos like Planet Hollywood and MGM Grand over the past year, and early returns on the modest allocations have been promising. "Per the American Gaming Association, the average slot machine player is 58 in Nevada," Lowenstein says. "We've dropped that age 22 years, which the casinos have never seen with a gaming product before."

Starting in June, Gamblit is expanding beyond touchscreen games with its first joystick-driven experience, Pac-Man Battle Casino. Designed in concert with Bandai Namco, this is a gambling-focused variation on the popular Battle Royale competitive arcade game. Gamblit also plans to introduce units with console controllers down the line. Lowenstein isn't ready to share the names of other publishers Gamblit is working with, but he claims they have all been very receptive to the idea of venturing into casino floors.

"The video game industry is really receptive because I think they see the casino space as this new frontier of a modern arcade," he says. "There is so much money, it's a several hundred-billion-dollar industry – it's bigger than games, it's bigger than movies. They're all seeing the potential."

Similarly, the casinos see the huge potential of injecting video games onto their floor. Gamblit intentionally started off with a modest footprint so it could focus on honing the tutorials and making sure everyone understood how the gambling component works on top of the standard game. The early models proved popular, so the company currently has a waiting list for other casinos that want in on the action. By the end of 2018, Gamblit plans to be in around 450 casinos across the United States.

With max bets around $10, these skill-based gaming machines won't be supplanting high-stakes games. But Gamblit sees this as a natural evolution of the casino floor that keeps the offerings relevant to a new generation of casino goers. That's what ultimately drove Lowenstein to leave his career making games for companies like Rockstar Games, Electronic Arts, and Activision for Gamblit.

"I said wait – so you're telling me that one day I could take Mario Kart and Street Fighter and put it back onto a casino floor and bring arcades back to life?" he says. "I'm in." ◆

1 CREDIT = $0.01
BALANCE CREDITS 10000
WIN 0 CREDITS
BET 200 CREDITS
COMPLETE
3 dogs to rescue
121 rifle kills to go
7
3,097

Into the Dead

WHEN FMV RULED THE WORLD

AND WHY IT'S COMING BACK

by Javy Gwaltney

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30/06/94

For a brief time, full-motion video (FMV) games were omnipresent. In the '90s, the format seemed like the future, with games like The 7th Guest and Wing Commander III promising an unmatched level of visual fidelity due their use of real-life actors, like Mark Hamill and Malcolm McDowell, over polygonal models and 3D animations.

This fantasy led to a hollow reality. FMV 'classics' like Night Trap and Tex Murphy are often ridiculed for the terrible performances, hideous visuals, and frustrating gameplay. And yet there's a certain charm and affection associated with the format.

Surprisingly, full-motion video games are now returning with games like The Bunker, #WarGames, and Sony's mysterious Erica on the horizon. With the genre coming back in style, we decided to take look at its initial rise and fall, and talk with creators to understand why it's returned.

Gobblin' Up Quarters

Dragon's Lair, the first true FMV must-play game, took arcades by storm in 1983. Dragon's Lair entranced patrons with the simplistic-yet-twitchy gameplay of most arcade classics wrapped up in a traditional fantasy adventure beautifully animated by Don Bluth (*The Secret of NIMH*, *The Land Before Time*). Its beauty stood out in the sea of other cabinets overflowing with rudimentary graphics. Though its innovation might be hard to notice today, for many people, Dragon's Lair was the first game that made them feel like they were playing through a movie.

Despite setting the tone for FMV games overall, Dragon's Lair proved to be a flash in the pan. Other FMV games came to arcades, but their premium cost (with each play costing two quarters instead of one) as well as the shoddy quality of clones like Cliff Hangar, which sliced up the anime *Lupin III* instead of creating unique animation, drove consumers away. Straggler titles like Mad Dog McCree would occasionally gain popularity, but by the early 90s, FMV had all but evaporated from arcades around the world.

And then something marvelous happened: the CD-ROM.

Directing Movies From Your Desk

The arrival of the CD-ROM was huge: oodles more space than cartridges and floppy discs meant developers had the real estate to take on more ambitious visions. Though the CD was a massive upgrade from previous data storage units, it was only capable of holding a few minutes of footage in a video game, with developers having to pack in multiple discs in retail to to hold more video.

The early-to-late '90s became inundated with games that either were full FMV or contained elements of the format. The most famous example is 1992's (surprisingly innocuous) Night Trap, which, alongside Mortal Kombat's gory fatalities, resulted in the U.S. government turning its eye toward the content in games and how it reaches the hands of minors, ultimately leading to the creation of the ESRB.

Outside of Night Trap's notoriety, other notable FMV games emerged, like The 7th Guest and the gory Phantasmagoria. Indeed, early FMV efforts shared a strong overlap with horror B-movies, and for practical reasons: Making movies and making games is expensive. Acting performances in these titles, outside of the occasional celebrity cameo, were awful. So were the special effects, resulting in interactive movies with amateur-hour production values.

However, that didn't matter much for many years. The ability to make choices that had the illusion of steering narrative, resulting in different endings, was novel enough to make the obvious shortcomings easier to overlook. FMV rode on the back of an exciting multimedia notion that game tech was evolving by leaps and bounds, promising gamers the kind of adventure they'd never experienced before. Even titles from large studios and featuring huge intellectual properties made use of FMV, like Star Wars: Dark Forces II – Jedi Knight and The X-Files Game.

So why did it go away?

Phantasmagoria

Tex Murphy: Tesla Effect

The Light That Burns Twice As Bright

As developers and publishers have discovered many times over the years, the problem with making the crux of your game the technology it runs on is that whatever is going to kill your game's appeal is just right around the bend. So it was for FMV.

As time went on and innovations were made on both hardware and software fronts, FMV games just weren't that fun or diverse. Most of them were adventure games or quick-time event button-mashers. As other genres began to embrace 3D graphics while offering more complex gameplay, consumers set their sights on games like Half-Life and Super Mario 64.

By the time the PlayStation 2 and Xbox arrived, FMV games were extinct, with the interactive movie adventure genre that had depended on the technology for so long finally embracing 3D graphics in games like the choice-driven Indigo Prophecy.

However, in recent years, thanks to the expansion of digital marketplaces like with Steam and console storefronts that make distributing a game easier, cheaper, niche-style games have found a new life. This has resulted in a number of genres undergoing a second life of popularity, like adventure titles, dungeon crawlers, and roguelikes.

A resurgence of full-motion video games is underway as well, with different creators breathing life into the genre for radically different reasons.

What's Old Is New

In 2012, Chris Jones, developer of the cult classic Tex Murphy series, took to Kickstarter to crowdfund a new entry. Where many FMV games felt like B-movies incidentally, Jones and his crew played up how bad the production values of the genre were and how goofy the format could be, with his bumbling loser of a detective fumbling through mysteries in a *Blade Runner*-inspired version of San Francisco.

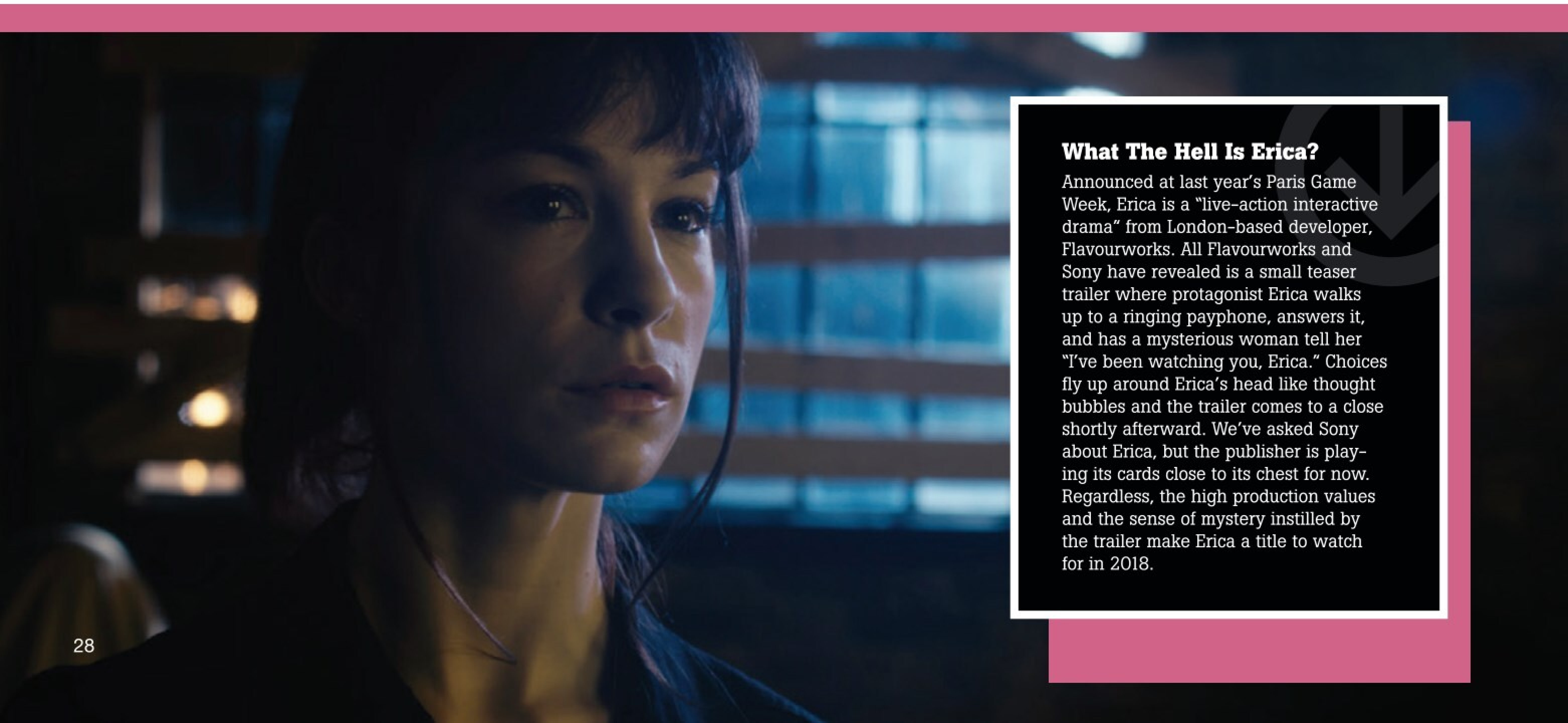
Murphy's inherent cheesiness has made it one of the most beloved staples of FMV, and the nostalgia for that brand of goofiness resulted in a successful crowdfunding campaign. Tex Murphy: Tesla Effect launched two years later to mixed critical reviews, but the game found its audience, with players praising the authenticity to the quirky era of FMV adventure games and selling around 400,000 copies.

UK publisher Wales Interactive noticed the reemergence of the format and has since staked its fortune on it, their catalog filled with FMV games. However, Wales sees the popularity of the genre as something more than just playing on nostalgia. "For many gamers, FMV is an entirely new concept," says communications manager Ben Tester. "For others it brings a wave of nostalgic feelings, so as a publisher, it's exciting to be a part of something that receives such a positive reaction from its audience."

Wales Interactive strives to push beyond the low production values of heyday FMV. The Late Shift is a branching path heist movie with shades of noir with grit to spare. You'd also be hard-pressed to find any humor in The Bunker, a post-apocalyptic title that focuses on one man's attempts to overcome the phobias and mental conditions that have set in after being raised in a bunker all of his life.

For the creators of these games, the reason they chose FMV is a combination of expertise and practicality. "I am a scriptwriter and director with a film background." says Allan Plenderleith,

The 7th Guest



What The Hell Is Erica?

Announced at last year's Paris Game Week, Erica is a "live-action interactive drama" from London-based developer, Flavourworks. All Flavourworks and Sony have revealed is a small teaser trailer where protagonist Erica walks up to a ringing payphone, answers it, and has a mysterious woman tell her "I've been watching you, Erica." Choices fly up around Erica's head like thought bubbles and the trailer comes to a close shortly afterward. We've asked Sony about Erica, but the publisher is playing its cards close to its chest for now. Regardless, the high production values and the sense of mystery instilled by the trailer make Erica a title to watch for in 2018.

creator of The Bunker. “The decision for us to use live action over CGI was always based on our skillset, and the fact that the emotional story we are trying to tell in The Bunker is easier to convey with real actors who get complex emotional scenes. Shooting film is expensive sure, but hiring a team of animators and designers to create your world in CGI is also expensive. At the end of the day it comes down to which artistic style suits the story best.”

The Crooked, Branching Future

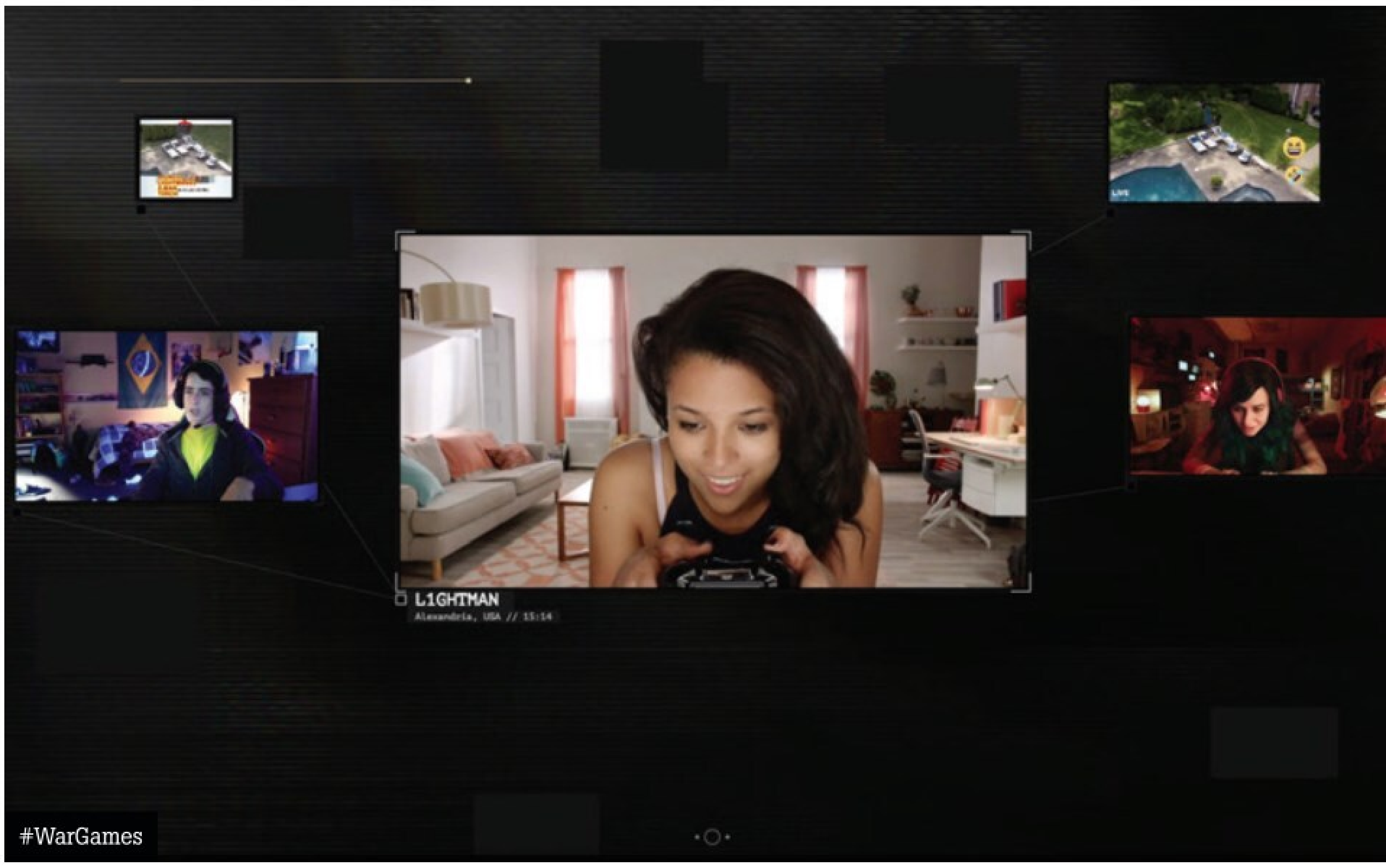
Tester believes FMV has huge possibilities with an audience outside of gaming, “It’s only a matter of time before FMV reaches the mainstream audience with major TV, film or tripe-A game studios bringing big budget productions to the market,” he says. “We’re already seeing eyebrows raised from the likes of Netflix (*Buddy Thunderstruck*) and HBO (*Mosaic*), who have released their own interactive miniseries.”

Indeed, technology is changing and FMV is changing with it, mutating into new, hard-to-classify experiences. In 2015, Sam Barlow, a designer who worked on the Silent Hill series, released Her Story, a detective game where you try to piece together a crime with only a search engine and live-action interview segments with a woman who’s both suspect and victim.

“At its core I’m very, very attached to performance as a way of telling a story,” Barlow says. “The act of compression it involves, the way that collaboration and interpretation adds to the thing. And it gets to the heart of the emotion in the piece, it makes it real in a way that for me is often a little bit more wonderful than many of the other ways of telling a story. Previously I’d worked with voice actors and motion capture and performance capture and you were always chasing the next quality bar and the tech was always improving, but it always felt imperfect. I was always jealous of the video reference we’d have of a take – it always moved me more than the CGI version. So that’s really what drives me to do this stuff.”

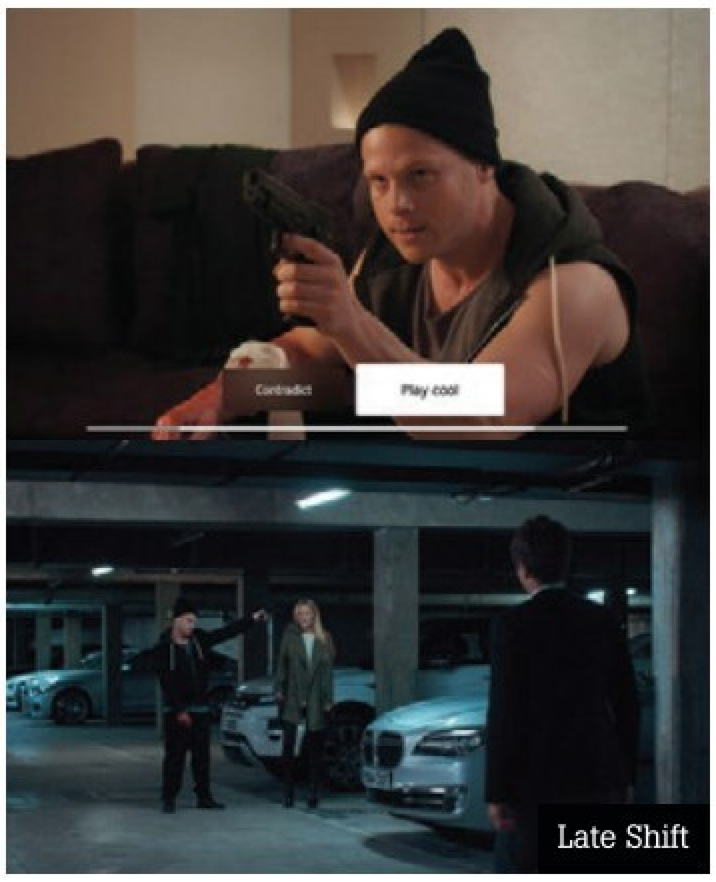
Barlow has two more FMV projects in the works. #WarGames is being billed as “an interactive series” that lets players/watchers make choices dictating the direction of the plot. Telling Lies is intended to be a spiritual successor to Her Story, a political thriller with a bigger budget. “I’m most excited about seeing what people come up with outside of the FMV Game traditions,” he says. “Video is such an omnipresent medium now and we shoot video and share it and even use video as a whole layer in which to experience and share video games themselves. I think interesting ideas will emerge from this present moment that find new ways to use filmed content in interactive narratives.”

With the rise of streaming services and the digital marketplace, the intertwining of cinematic, FMV storytelling with the interactivity of video games is inevitable. Whether the effort will be successful is another story entirely, but developers are intent on mining this format for its worth in the modern age. Even major studios, like Remedy (creators of Max Payne and Alan Wake), explored FMV with Quantum Break’s filmed episodes playing between chapters in the game. We’ll likely have to wait a while to see the places that FMV’s evolutions take it, but for the first time in a long time, a genre that everyone wrote off as a fad has an exciting future bubbling with possibility.

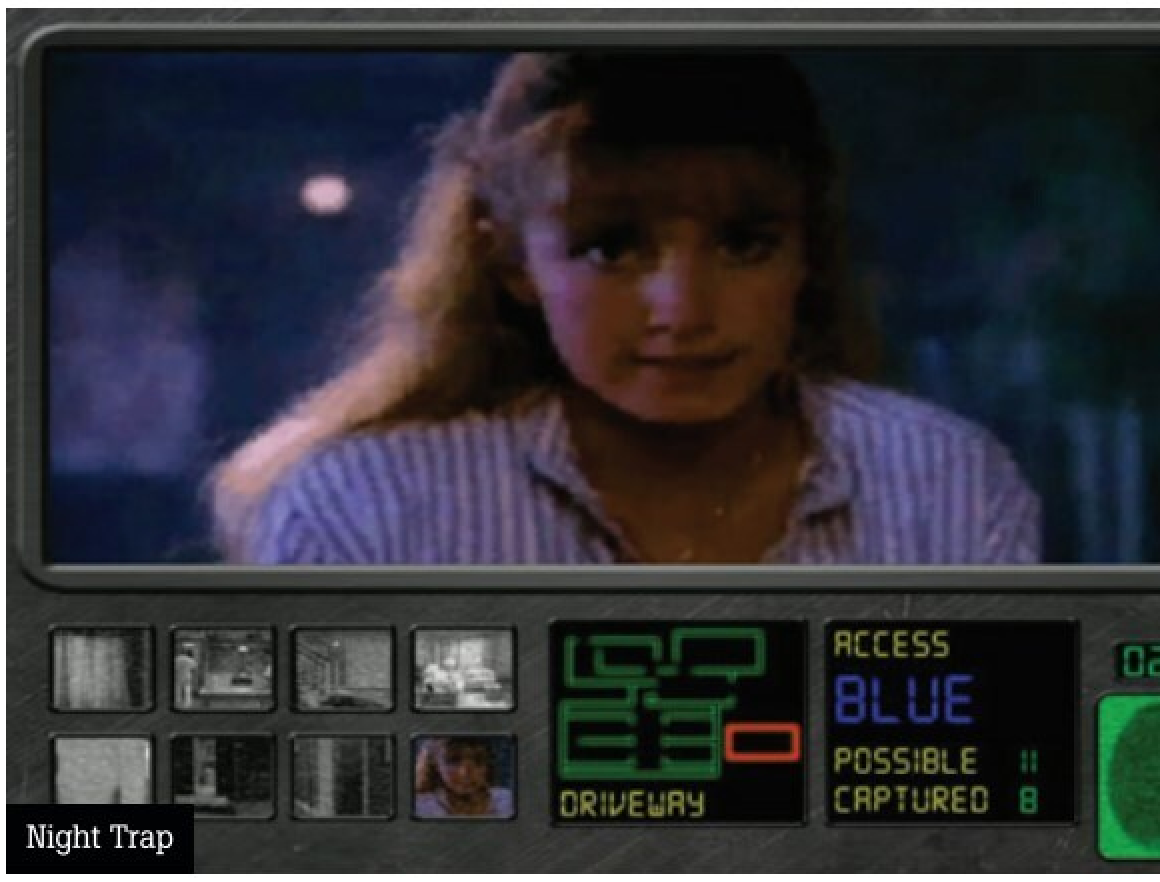


#WarGames

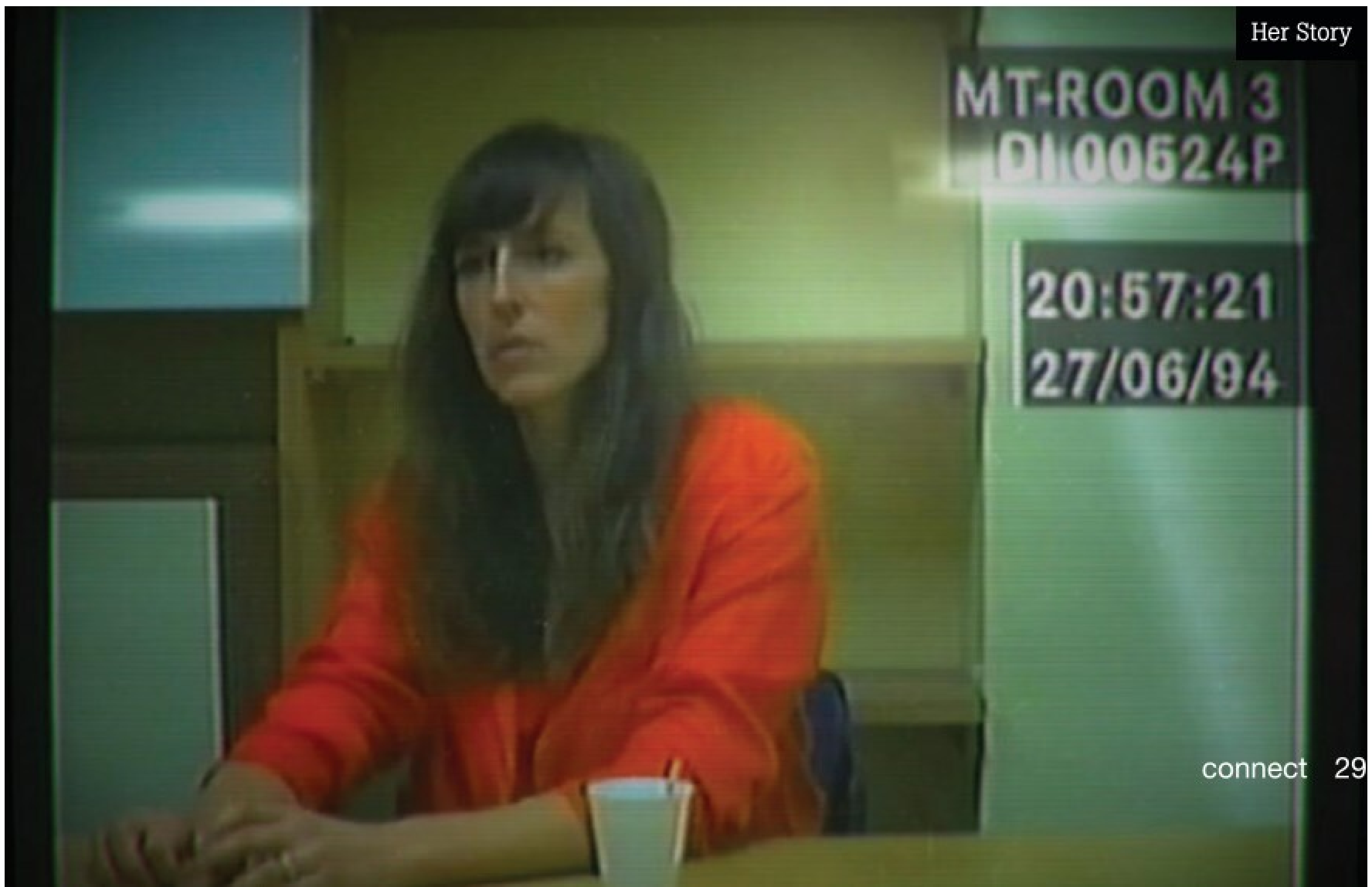
The Bunker



Late Shift



Night Trap



Her Story

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TM

Power up your home decor!

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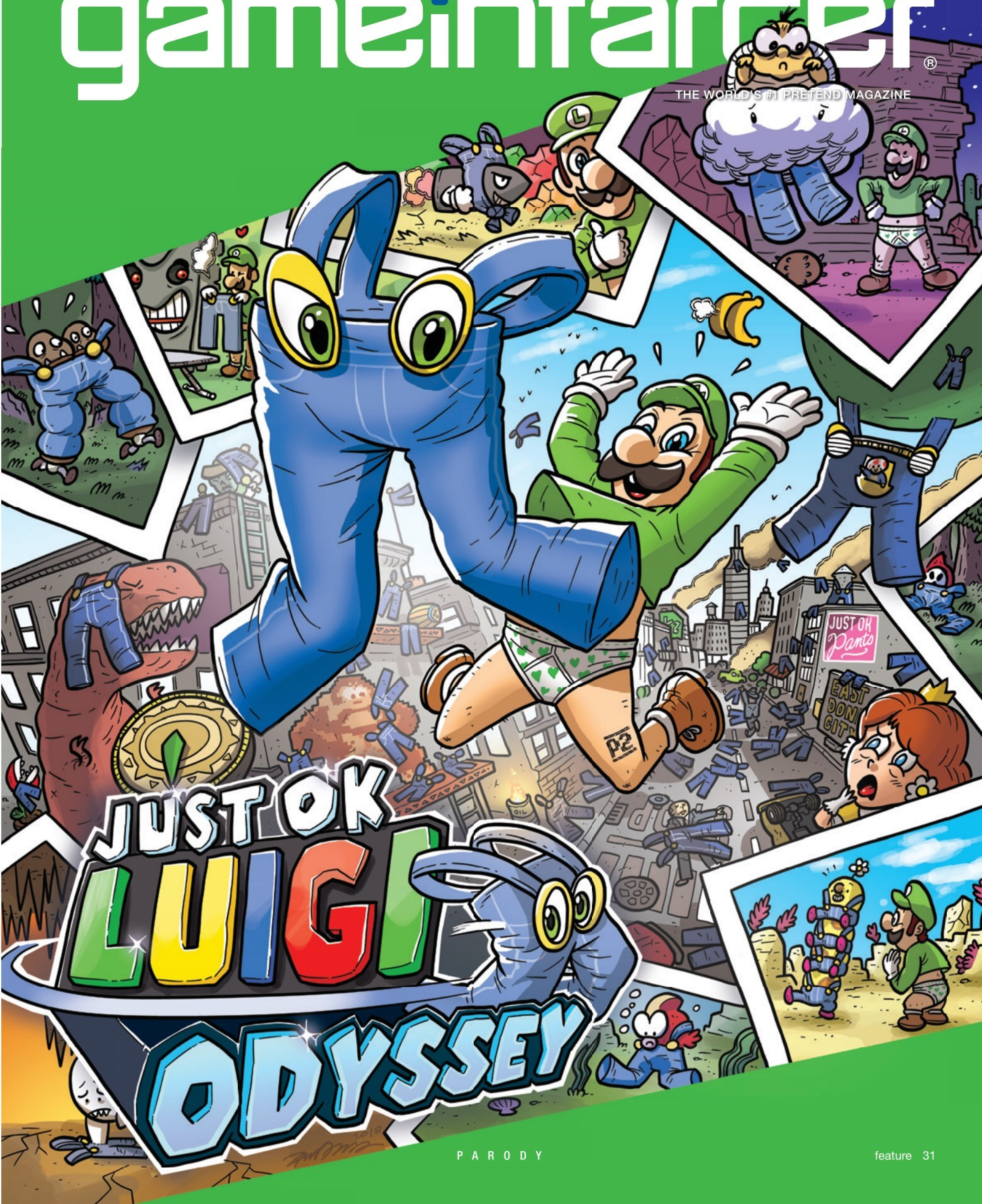

L
JUST OK Pants
EAST DONK CITY
P2
OIL

JUST OK LUIGI ODYSSEY

Like Old Things More

DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

For the correct opinions about the video game industry, follow @GI_Darth

Modern gamers have no respect for history. All they want to do is play the latest installment of Mainstream Shooter for Casuals, or Map Full of Icons. But if you put a classic game in front of them – a game that helped define and build the industry as we know it – they wrinkle their noses and complain that it has bad graphics or simplistic mechanics. Well, it's time to get woke.

Fact: The best games humans have made (or will ever make) released at least 15 years ago. To appreciate the modern games you think you enjoy, you need to play and love their purer inspirations – timeless masterpieces that aren't buckling under the weight of technology and features.

If a game has an outdated art style, you should like it. If it has a chiptune soundtrack, you should like it. If it feels like a prototype experience that was only refined in subsequent installments, you should like it. Remember: This isn't about having fun – it's about developing a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of gaming history, so then you can have fun.

Look, I know what I'm talking about here. I was in on the ground floor, playing classics like Mario 64, Final Fantasy VII, and Halo. I even remember crowding around Street Fighter III in the arcade. I know my roots, and the roots of the entire industry. You should too if you want anyone to take your opinion seriously; that's why I'm a gaming journalist and you aren't.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

Microsoft Announces Xbox One F

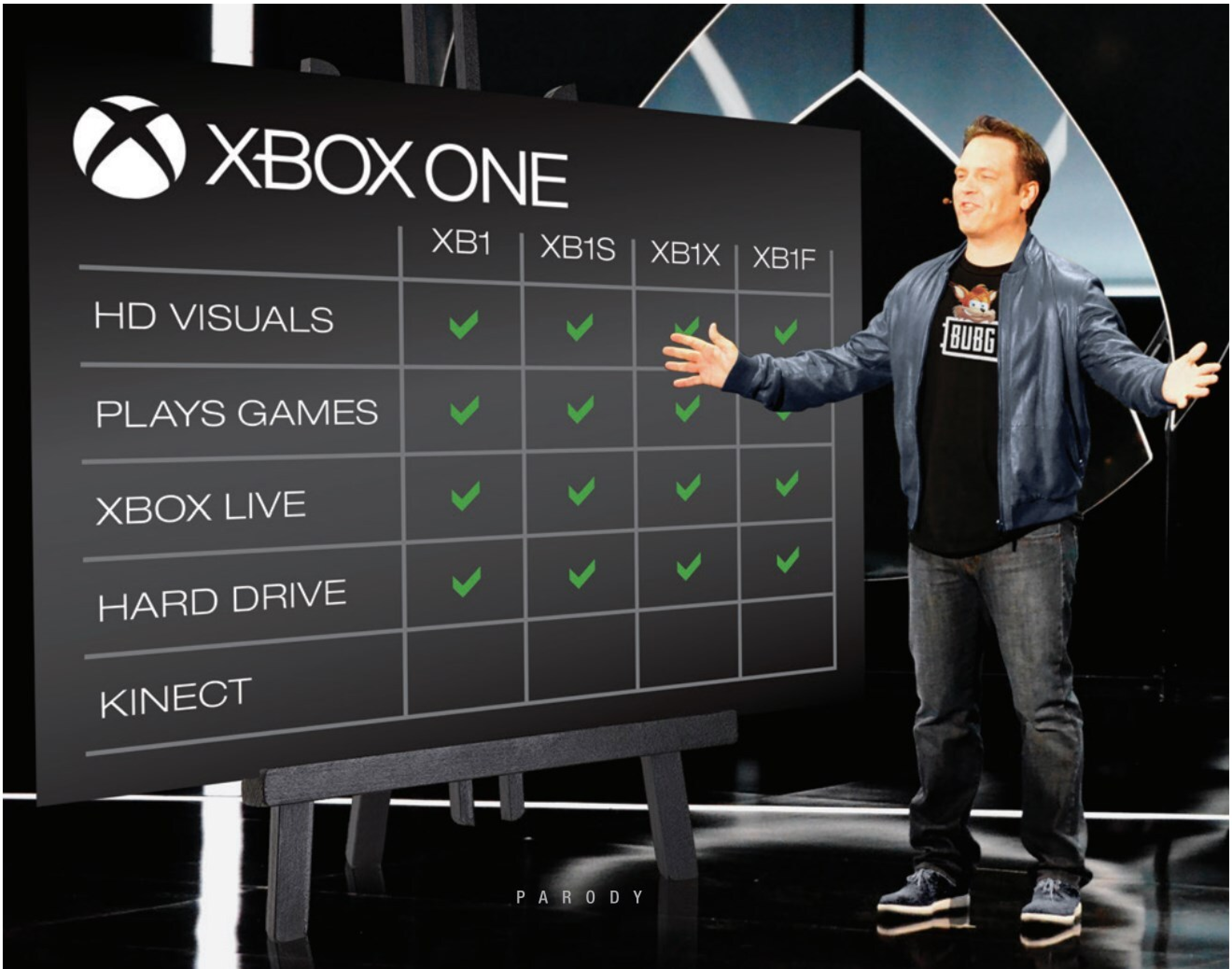
The most powerful console ever made, again

Microsoft executive and gaming T-shirt enthusiast Phil Spencer took the stage during the company's "March-rosoft Madness" event to announce the annual Xbox One redesign.

"We know our messaging surrounding the Xbox One X was confusing," Spencer said. "But after a lot of feedback, I can confidently say that we are back, and we're ready to 'F' this iteration up!"

Spencer then unveiled the Xbox One F, a console that features an $899 price point, along with a modest 8-percent increase in processing speed over the Xbox One X. "The added horsepower gets us to 5K visuals," Spencer boasted. "Absolutely no televisions support that resolution – that's how ahead of the curve we are!"

With the addition of the Xbox One F to Microsoft's portfolio, the company now has four versions of its hardware, which is more than double the number of the console's exclusive titles. "We really think the new iteration will appeal to the dozens of fans who enjoy buying expensive game consoles more than they do actually playing games," Spencer said. "Now, who's ready to get 'F'ed?"



XBOX ONE

	XB1	XB1S	XB1X	XB1F
HD VISUALS	✓	✓	✓	✓
PLAYS GAMES	✓	✓	✓	✓
XBOX LIVE	✓	✓	✓	✓
HARD DRIVE	✓	✓	✓	✓
KINECT				

The Good

FUNNY GLITCH

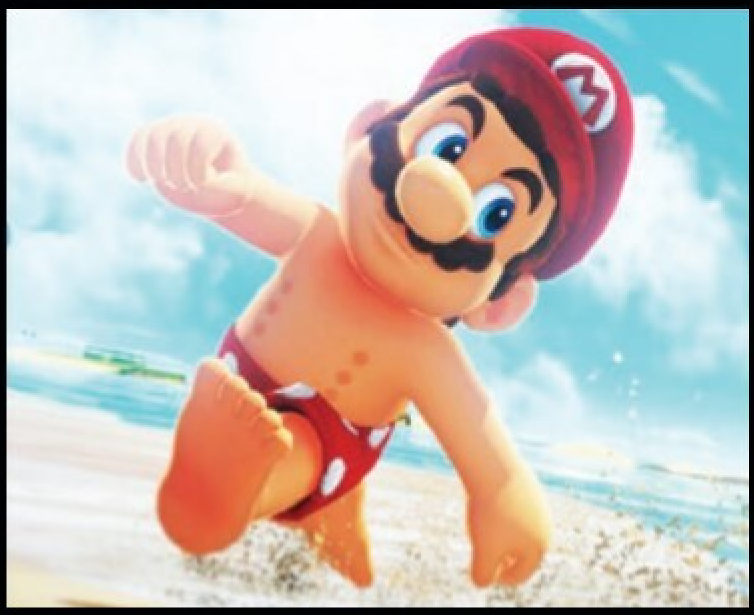
Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo are all on the same page for once! The console manufacturers have decided to change the name of their share/screenshot buttons to the "**FUNNY GLITCH BUTTON**." The change comes after internal data revealed that's literally the only thing anyone ever uses those buttons for anyway.

The Bad

Despite its many patches and Game of the Year awards, Nintendo recently noticed that The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild has a nasty **WEAPON-BREAKING BUG**. Nintendo apologized for the error (which affects nearly every weapon in the game) and promised a fix soon.

The Ugly

The internet went wild for shirtless Mario in Odyssey, so the iconic plumber now has **EXTRA NIPPLES**.



Quotable

"Please stop calling it a mask. This is my real face."

Nier: Automata director **Yoko Taro**

Virtual Boy Classic Edition

Nintendo's newest classic console pays homage to the company's most infamous hardware. While the Virtual Boy's small, monocular form factor makes it impossible to replicate the original's pseudo-3D effects, Nintendo says the aggressive red visuals still induce authentic head-splitting migraines. The unit contains the Virtual Boy's entire library of 22 programs (legally, Nintendo can't call them "games") including Mario Clash, Waterworld, and a worse version of Tetris. To drum up interest among faithful fans, Nintendo is also including an original Wario game that was finished but never released for obvious reasons.

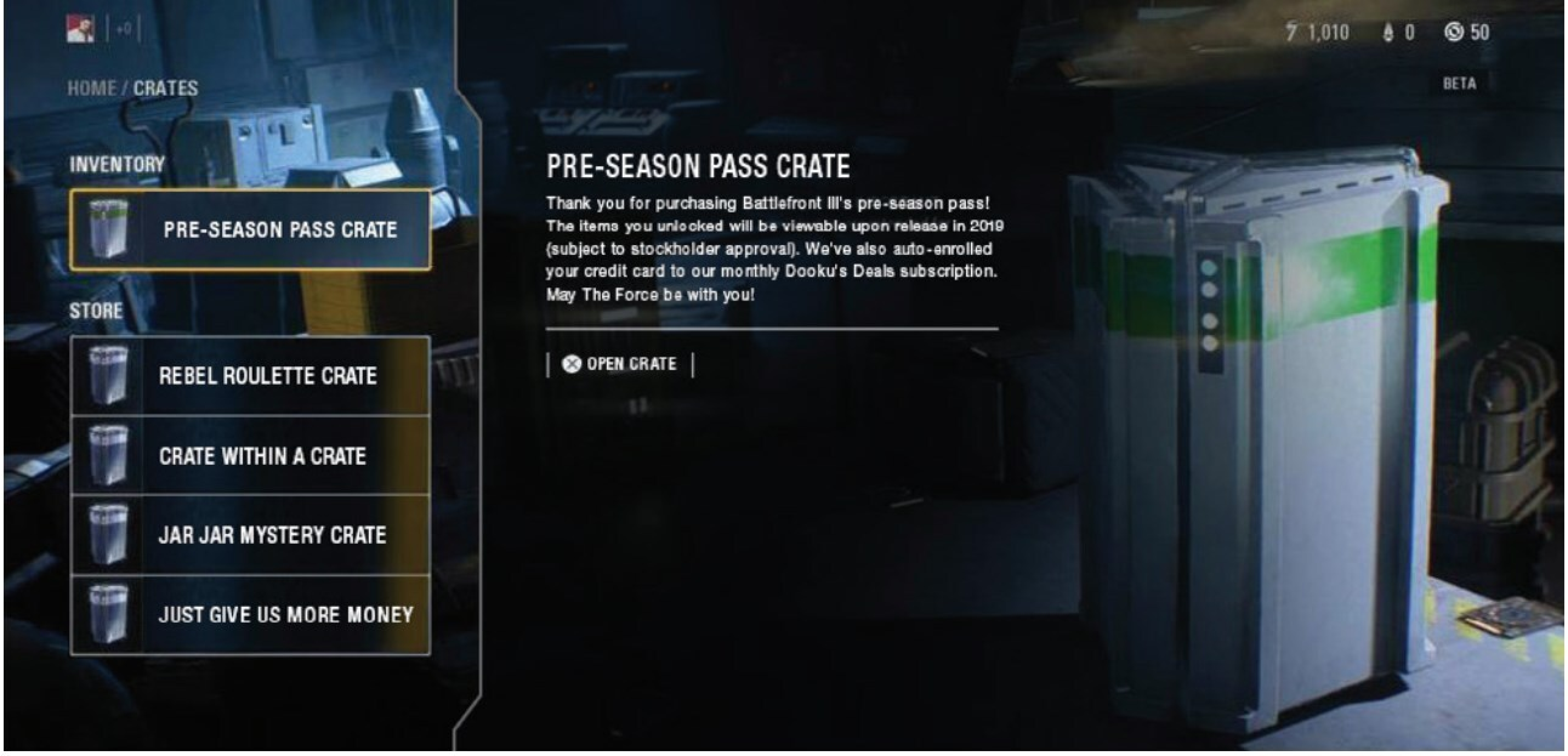
$179.99 | nintendo.com

1 Skyrim: The Comprehensive Collection

Finally, you can return to the world of Skyrim! This collector's set contains every Skyrim release [At the time of this printing. –ed.], including separate copies of the original PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC versions – plus the patches that made them playable. If that wasn't enough, the box also contains the remastered PlayStation 4 and Xbox One editions, Skyrim VR, Skyrim for Switch, and a version of Skyrim that was localized for Brazil. Those who preorder the game will receive a download code for the audio-only version for Amazon Alexa.

$49.99 | elderscrolls.bethesda.net

1
PS4
PS3
XBOX 360
SKYRIM
SKYRIM VR
Alexa 1



PRE-SEASON PASS CRATE

Thank you for purchasing Battlefront III's pre-season pass! The items you unlocked will be viewable upon release in 2019 (subject to stockholder approval). We've also auto-enrolled your credit card to our monthly Dooku's Deals subscription. May The Force be with you!

Star Wars Battlefront III

How to (blue) milk a franchise

» Platform
Visa, American Express, PayPal

» Style
24-Player First-Person Money Pit

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
EA DICE, Diebold Nixdorf Inc., NCR Corporation

» Release
When Battlefront II Revenue Dries Up

Last year's Battlefront II was panned by critics and players alike due to its balance-breaking, pay-to-win lootboxes. Naturally, EA wants to do more of that for the newly announced Battlefront III.

To its credit, the company isn't completely blind to the criticisms. "We understand some gamers don't like the idea of lootboxes," says EA CEO Andrew Wilson. "But you simply can't turn a profit with a poisonous license like Star Wars unless you have some source of continuous supplemental income. Any EA Influencer will tell you the same."

To combat those financial hardships, EA has launched a revolutionary new "pre-season pass" for Battlefront III, which is available until launch next year. For $30, the pre-season pass unlocks the opportunity to purchase weapons, vehicles, and skins prior to release. "Of course, because we want to avoid spoilers, you won't be able to use or even see what you've bought until Battlefront III is out," Wilson says. "It's an amazing deal – just ask an EA Influencer!"

Apart from confirming the obvious battle royale mode, EA is not ready to reveal Battlefront III's gameplay, setting, characters, plot, or classes. "I mean, those things will definitely be in there, and we promise they will be good this time," Wilson says. "Right now we're focused on a series of detailed dev diaries that explain what else you can buy in the game. Our EA Influencers love them!" » **Darth Clark**

Yakuza & Mario At The Olympic Games

Kiryu-ing the Olympic torch (get it?)

» Platform
Podiums

» Style
92-Nation Sports

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Sega

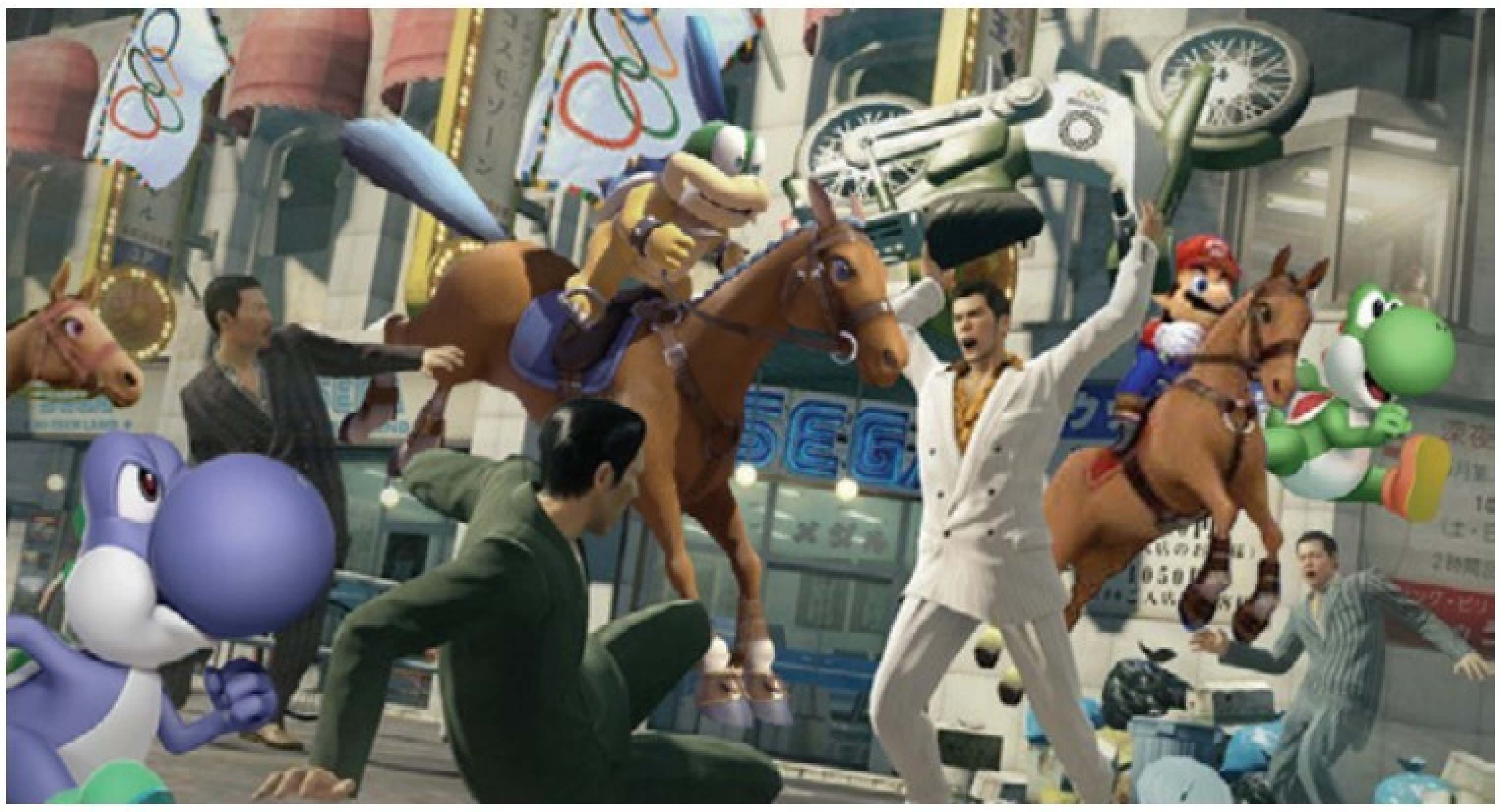
» Release
Summer 2020

Just when sports fans were finished ignoring the Winter Games, Sega has revealed its tie-in plans for the upcoming 2020 Summer Olympics. The company is once again using the international athletic competition as a bridge between its beloved characters and the cast of Nintendo's biggest franchise, but with a slight detour. Instead of Sonic (who Sega says is too busy starring in Sonic Mania 3D), Mario will be sharing the global stage with Kazuma Kiryu, star of Sega's popular Yakuza series.

"It made a lot of sense for us, because the 2020 games are set in Tokyo, which is where Kiryu lives," says Sega's CEO and president, Haruki Satomi. To keep development costs reasonably low, the majority of the games in Yakuza & Mario At The Olympic Games take place in Yakuza's fictional Kamurocho district. "We figured Yakuza fans would want to feel at home in an environment that they have explored so, so many times before."

Alongside real contests like swimming and weightlifting, characters from the Mario and Yakuza universes also compete in new events like "Kart Karaoke" and "100-meter beat a guy to death with a bicycle." Events are interrupted with additional sub missions, where Olympians are tasked with collecting coins and helping children acquire pornography.

We're excited to go for the gold in Summer 2020, when the game – including its battle royale mode – is released. » **Darth Clark**



Cabela's Animal Hunter: World

Your move, Gander Mountain

Style 1-Player Hunting (17 Players Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Pretty Sure It's Activision? **Release** Octember 32 **Rating** T10+

Activision's long-running Cabela's series has built up a cult following over the years, but mainstream success has proven elusive. The latest entry, Cabela's Animal Hunter: World changes everything. Hunting deer, sheep, rams, and other creatures has always been rewarding, but the introduction of online multiplayer and crafting are what the franchise has needed.

I was a little concerned that a number of gameplay tweaks would make it feel too casual, but everything works beautifully. The maps are now seamless, so you can stroll between the African savannah to the Colorado Rockies without encountering a single load screen. You encounter plenty of wildlife, however. Up to four players can team up, which makes victory against fantastical creatures like the Really Horny Goat and The Tall Deer more certain. Solo players can bring along an A.I.-controlled pup, the adorable Labico. However you decide to take on these beasts, prepare for a lengthy fight. One battle took me and my teammates two hours, as we repeatedly shot a bear whose mobility and health was seemingly unaffected.

The rewards are worth it. I enjoyed strutting around the online hub, showing off my Water Buffalo hat and Frogskin pants – trophies earned only through hard-earned battles. And nothing felt better than beating the competition in the game's battle-royale mode with a shotgun I'd constructed from hooves, bones, and udders. » **Darth Clark**

30.06

PS4 • Xbox One
Deer Stand

» **Concept**
Take the cult series mainstream by appealing to fans of another cult series

» **Graphics**
The ~~monsters~~ animals look great, from the tips of their bump-mapped snouts to the ends of their volumetrically fur-shaded tails

» **Sound**
They go "Baa!" real nice

» **Playability**
Activision has made a wide variety of quality-of-life improvements, including better aiming and smellier deer urine

» **Entertainment**
Shooting animals is always a great time, but doing it with your buddies is even better. Wait, are we still talking about this game?

» **Replay Value**
y

Pro Evolution Survive

Dead ball

Style 1-Player Vestigial Engine (40-Player Online, But Only After Several Hours Of Solo Play) **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Just Enough People From The Previous Team **Release** Unwelcome **Rating** D for Desecration

As the second installment of Konami's newly minted Survive series, PES is all about taking the core gameplay you love, removing the best parts, then shoehorning zombies in for some reason.

The story is simple: While all of the popular players are off at the World Cup, every unimportant nobody in professional soccer gets sucked into a dimensional vortex. They are transported to Microtransasia, a zombie-infested plane where they must play soccer matches against the undead in order to fend off starvation.

You win food and water for scoring goals, but stopping to eat and drink before every shot really breaks up the flow of the action. The in-game purchases are also too intrusive; you have to start from the beginning every time you play unless you pay $10 to unlock save slots. Even worse, you need to spend premium currency to access the battle royale mode, which is the only multiplayer option.

Ultimately, all of the core Pro Evo mechanics are here, but used in weird and unsatisfying ways. As a soccer fan, I wanted to give this spin-off a chance…but it racks up too many yellow cards. » **Darth Clark**

1

PS4 • Xbox One
Pachinko

» **Concept**
Create a Pro Evo spin-off that trades its realism and nuance for zombies

» **Graphics**
Yeah, the game looks good – but that's like putting on a tux to go to White Castle

» **Sound**
Screams in a barren hellscape are less motivating than cheers in a packed stadium

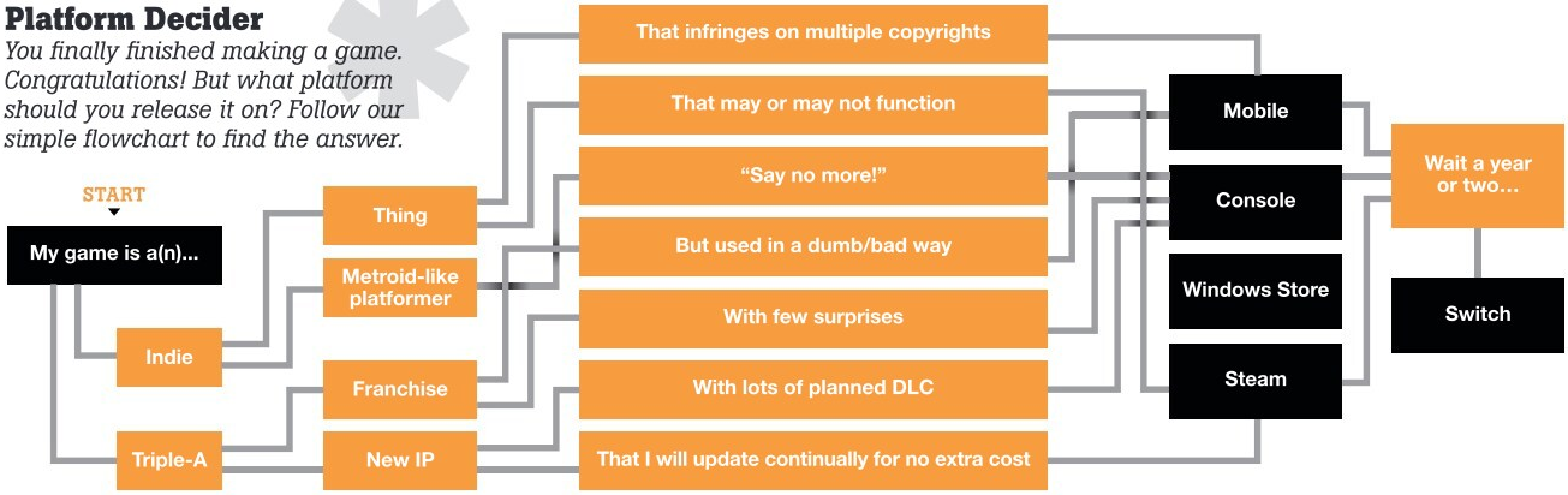
» **Playability**
Features the same tight controls as the core Pro Evo games, but you use them to do worse stuff

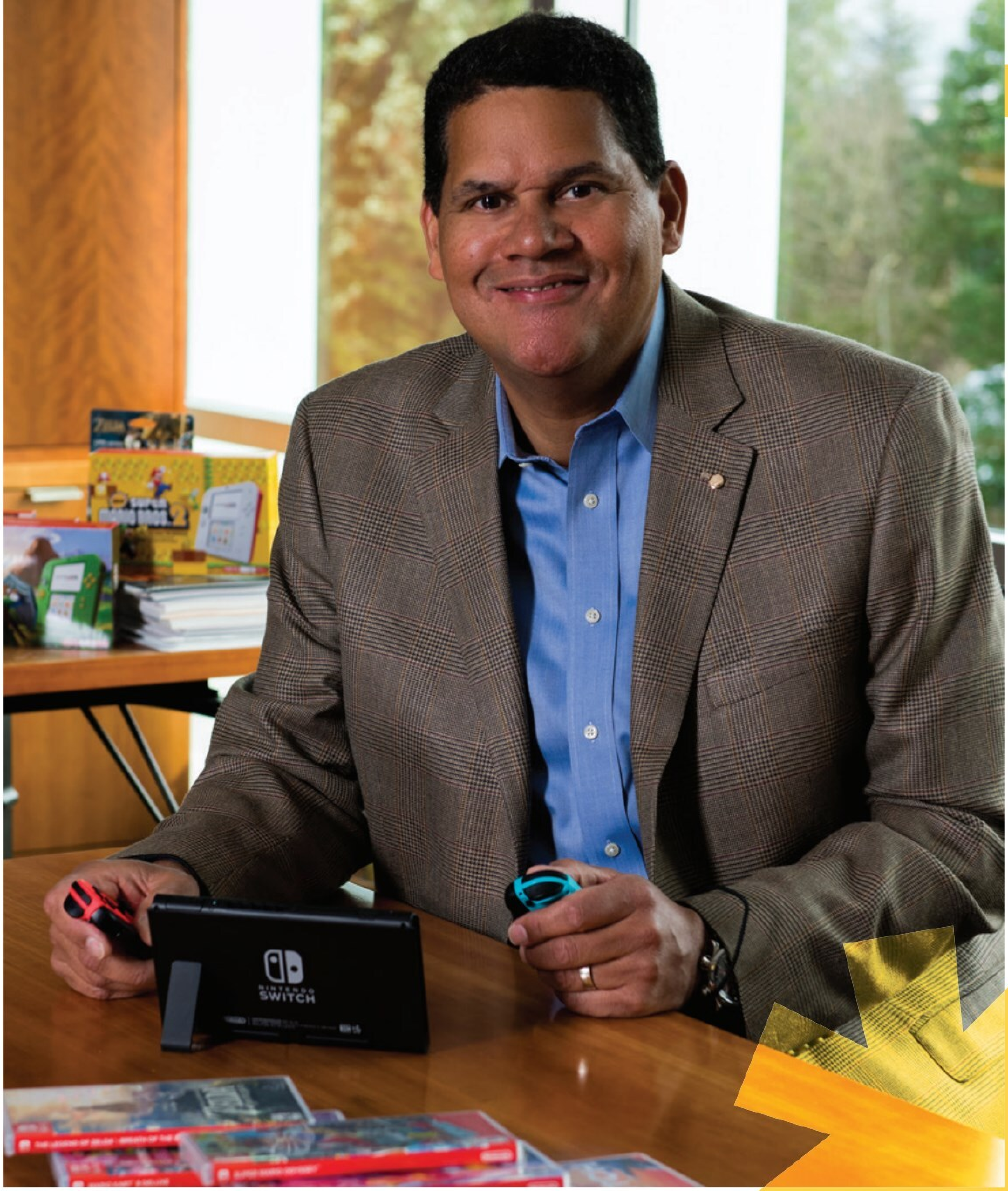
» **Entertainment**
If you are the kind of person who tries to convince people that bad games are actually good, you won't want to miss this

» **Replay Value**
Don't

Platform Decider

You finally finished making a game. Congratulations! But what platform should you release it on? Follow our simple flowchart to find the answer.





Smash Hit

By day, Reggie Fils-Aimé is the president and chief operation officer of Nintendo of America. By night, he's an animated spokesperson who isn't afraid to do silly things to promote Nintendo products. We talked to Fils-Aimé about Nintendo Switch's remarkable first year, and what fans can expect in the future.

At what point did you know Switch would be a game-changer? Was it early in production, or did you need to see how consumers used it?
When I first saw Nintendo Switch, I was convinced it would provide experiences never seen before. I thought the ability to take console-quality games on the go and share them with others, plus all the other new features built into the console and the Joy-Con controllers, would really change how people experience their favorite games. It enables a player to always have time to play their favorite games, and this is a powerful concept.

Of course, even when we see the potential of a system internally, we never know how the public will react to it. We saw strong reactions from the public from our very first introductory video. From there, enthusiasm built to launch and all through the 2017 holiday season. We're truly appreciative of how fans have reacted, and we're only getting started.

Was having new Zelda and Mario games in the launch year something that was put forward early?

interview by Andrew Reiner

For the launch of any new system we always want to put forth our best possible content. It was critically important to have strong Nintendo IP at the launch and we were fortunate for that to be The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, which was honored as Game of the Year by many outlets around the world (including *Game Informer*!), and reached beyond the series' core fan base to an even bigger audience.

The game was a strong way to kick off Nintendo Switch, while Super Mario Odyssey was a nice bookend for the year. From there we were able to deliver a steady cadence of content for Nintendo Switch, including Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, Splatoon 2, the launch of new IP in Arms and some great third-party partnerships, such as Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle from Ubisoft and the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild collaboration in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim from Bethesda. Plus, with the strong indie content we have received, there were always high-quality new games to play throughout our launch.

Altogether, in addition to Nintendo-developed content, there has been a nice stream of third-party games for Nintendo Switch in 2017, and that's continuing this year as well.

When you create entertainment, you never really know how it will be received externally. Do you have any stories or moments of interacting with Nintendo fans that changed your perception of Switch, and what it could mean to people?
Leading up to launch, I saw how excited people were to get their hands on Nintendo Switch. And of course the launch event at our Nintendo New York store was a spectacle, and it's one of those opportunities for me to interact directly with fans and hear how excited they are to play the new system. But I think the real power of Nintendo Switch to transform the way people play was proven to me when I first saw someone playing one in the wild.

Fairly soon after launch, I was on a plane. I was playing The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and I saw someone else playing their Nintendo Switch. We talked constantly during the flight, to the point that the flight attendants were getting a little upset with us. But they, along with all the other passengers that heard us, were asking us a lot of questions by the time we exited the plane. I'm sure I sold a few systems to new fans that day!

Switch was a hard system to find for all of 2017. Can you walk us through the difficulties and potential pitfalls of predicting and fulfilling on hardware demand?
It can be challenging to predict demand for any new product, especially in the entertainment industry. That said, we achieved sales of 5.94 million units in 2017 in the Americas alone, and at the 10-month mark, Nintendo Switch became the fastest-selling video game console in U.S. history.

Our goal is to provide a Nintendo Switch for everyone who wants to buy one. We were able to increase shipments toward the end of 2017 to meet the demand of the holiday rush. We're grateful for the continued demand in the market, and we continue to have ample supplies available.

Nintendo has always invested heavily in first-party software for all of its devices. Third-party support isn't as strong. After such a successful first year for Switch, are you seeing an uptick in publishers and developers looking to develop for it?
Absolutely. Just look at the third-party games we already have for Nintendo Switch, including Doom, Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle, Rocket League, Minecraft, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, to name just a few. That's not to mention the many quality games that our indie developers have brought to Nintendo Switch, such as Golf Story, Overcooked: Special Edition, Stardew Valley, and Celeste.

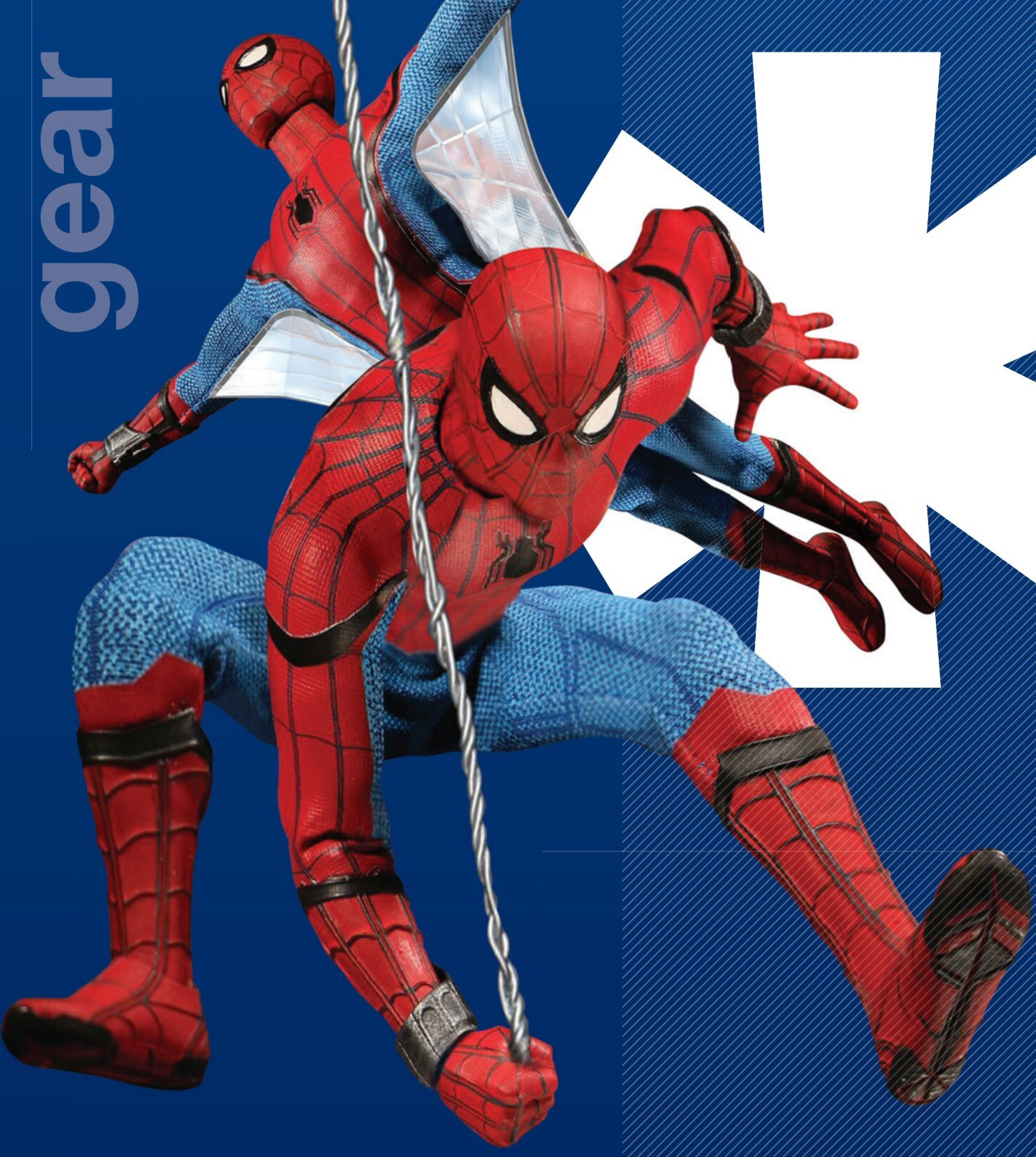
We want the very best games from the best developers on our platform. Nintendo Switch has both quantity and quality of third-party support going for it. Companies are embracing the system's many unique features, such as the ability to play games on the go.

Coming up, we have games from our partners including Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus, Octopath Traveler, Dark Souls: Remastered, South Park: The Fractured But Whole, Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy, and Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes. Plus, expect to see many more quality indie games from our passionate development community.

What can we expect from Switch in 2018? Is the return of Virtual Console in the cards?
Our Nintendo Direct on March 8 detailed a lot of what's on the horizon. The headline of course is that an installment in the Super Smash Bros. series is coming to Nintendo Switch. But in addition to the third-party games I mentioned, we'll also see Mario Tennis Aces, Hyrule Warriors: Definitive Edition, Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze, Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker and Sushi Striker: The Way of Sushido.

And of course we have the launch of Nintendo Labo on April 20, which delivers a whole new way to make use of Nintendo Switch and the Joy-Con controllers. With each Nintendo Labo kit, players can transform modular sheets of cardboard – specially designed to interact with Nintendo Switch and Joy-Con – into interactive Toy-Con creations like an RC car, piano, motorbike, or robot. Users can then play with their creations using the included software, and even discover how they work.

Finally, we're looking forward to providing a robust online experience for users through the launch of the Nintendo Switch Online service this September.



WHATEVER A SPIDER CAN

by Ben Reeves and Kyle Hilliard

Spider-Man: Homecoming Figure

This detailed, film-accurate figure from Mezco's One:12 Collective line feels as high-tech as Spider-Man's actual costume. Measuring a little over six-inches tall, the figure comes with three interchangeable head portraits, seven different hand molds, a spandex outfit, and clip-on web-wings. The figure also features over 30 points of articulation, which is one of Spider-Man's lesser-known super powers.

$80.00 | mezcotoyz.com

1 Funko Pop Spider-Man Bobblehead

There are plenty of Funko Pop figures, and plenty of them are Spider-Man, but this GameStop exclusive figure is Insomniac's design for Spider-Man, as featured in the game on the cover of this very issue. He has the standout white spider emblem on his chest and back, the new gauntlets, and he's lost the red boots in favor of something a little more modern. And his head bobbles.

$9.99 | gamestop.com

2 Spider-Man Icon 22oz Stainless Steel Water Bottle

After a long day fighting crime, every hero needs to refuel their fluids. This vacuum-insulated stainless steel water bottle from Marvel GamerVerse keeps beverages either hot or cold for up to six hours. The extra wide mouth makes it easy to drink from this bottle, whether you're on a bike trip or hanging from a wall.

$19.99 | vandorproducts.com

3 Q-Fig Spider Cam Diorama

There are a million Spider-Man figures that show Marvel's web-head in some dynamic pose that looks like he's ready to save the world, but we're endlessly charmed by Quantum Mechanix playful PVC diorama. It measures 5.6 inches and shows Spider-Man waiting to take the perfect shot. Where does Peter Parker get all those amazing photos of Spider-Man?

$14.95 | qmxonline.com

4 HJC CS-R3 Spider-Man Helmet

This advanced polycarbonate composite shell from HJC is lightweight, comfortable, and provides the kind of protection a real hero needs on the road. The helmet features adjustable ventilation and its face shield provides 95 percent UV protection. Maybe if Spider-Man had this level of head protection he'd be able to remember to pay rent on time.

$159 | hjchelmets.com

5 Marvel Figure 2 Pack – Spider-Man And Mister Negative

Mister Negative is a relative newcomer to Spider-Man's collection of villains, but he plays a big role in Insomniac's Spider-Man. Hopefully he makes enough of an impact on you to earn himself a spot on your desk. Getting Spider-Man with his new suit is an added bonus. The two pack will be available this fall. ◆

$19.99 | hasbro.com

*Final design pending

Media Shelf

BATMAN NINJA
MILES MORALES: THE ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN
TAXI
WATER WINE

BATMAN NINJA

When Batman is mysteriously transported to feudal Japan, he must stop the Joker from triggering a feudal war. This gorgeous anime comes from the producer of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, Junpei Mizusaki and the creator of *Afro Samurai*, Takashi Okazaki.

$24.99
wbshop.com

***MILES MORALES: ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN OMNIBUS* BY BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS**

After the death of Peter Parker, the world needed a hero. Fortunately, Miles Morales has a set of secret spider powers of his own and he's about to get pushed onto the world's stage. This collection of more than three dozen comics from Eisner Award-winning author Brian Michael Bendis remains hard to put down.

$125
marvel.com

***WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK* BY RYAN IKE**

Like the game, this official soundtrack is an eclectic mix of genres that reflect 20th Century Americana, including bluegrass, big band jazz, and folk from a mix of over a dozen live performers. This diverse audio experience helps Ryan Ike's soundtrack remain fresh long after you've finished the game.

$10.00
ryanike.bandcamp.com

Haven't We Been Here Before?

Video games, violence, and the link that doesn't hold up

by Matt Miller, Senior Previews Editor

Sometimes the worst songs have memorable refrains – but just because you can still hum the song 20 years later doesn't mean it's time for a modern cover. The purported links between video game playing and real-life violent acts makes for a popular tune. It always does the uncomfortable task of distracting people from the real debate, and offers a convenient target for channeling the very real despair, frustration, and anger that arises. The only problem? It's all bogus.

The problem of gun violence, especially as it affects our children, is painful and horrible to contemplate. But setting up the straw man of violent video games to take the fall is the same reckless and manipulative politicking that we've seen for decades, targeting at various times everything from comics to music to movies. The exasperated response we gamers must adopt almost feels cliché, and yet recent weeks have found defenders of the gaming medium having to once again state the clear verdict. Games are not the problem, and making the case that they are distracts from the actual issues.

In the wake of another horrific mass shooting, it's natural to desperately hunt for solutions. As has frequently been the case in these moments of crisis, the question of gun control is the first to arise for many Americans. More than two in three Americans polled wanted stronger gun control in the wake of the Parkland shooting. Those are tough numbers to confront if you're a politician who benefits from money related to the gun industry, or a lobbyist who does the same. No matter how you feel about the issue of gun control, all sides must be willing to acknowledge how the National Rifle Association chose to respond to the most recent crime in Parkland, as its chief spokesman declared that the real problem is violent media – especially video games.

I'd happily give up my favorite hobby, and even my profession, if I believed that the end result of supporting games was societal violence. But that's simply not the reality supported either by research or anecdotal observation. Games provide a safe space to socialize, build relationships, vent aggression, focus thought, gain a sense of mastery, and relieve stress for millions of players around the world. Like movie fans, football enthusiasts, or people who read books, it's a mistake to paint all game players with the same brush, or imply that they all respond identically to playing. In decades as a dedicated gamer, I've yet to encounter an individual who channeled their in-game feelings or experience into a real-life encounter. But that's all personal experience. Surely, there must be some evidence that offers a clearer answer.

Despite fervent efforts, critics have failed to find causal connections between playing video games (violent or otherwise) and actual real-world effects. This past January, the University of York published a study involving more than 3,000 participants that found games do not prime players to behave in certain ways, and that higher levels of violence in games do not necessarily increase aggression.

In 2017, the Media Psychology and Technology division of the American Psychological Association released a statement suggesting public officials and news media should avoid stating that criminal offenses were caused by violent media. "Discovering that a young crime perpetrator also happened to play violent video games is no more illustrative than discovering that he or she happened to wear sneakers or used to watch *Sesame Street*," the report reads. "This is a classic error: trying to predict something rare, such as a violent crime, by looking at something common, such as playing violent video games or, for that matter, drinking milk."

In 2011, the Supreme Court struck down a California law limiting the sale of violent video games, ruling that video games are protected speech under the First Amendment

An earlier 2015 task force report from the APA suggested a correlational link between violent games and short-term aggressive tendencies, but failed to yield any connection to criminal violence. That report was broadly criticized by a group of over 230 researchers for being "misleading and alarming" and citing "inconsistent or weak evidence."

But let's take a closer look at that last assertion, and give critics the benefit of the doubt. Have you ever felt angry about a frustrating death in Super Meat Boy? Have you felt your heartbeat and competitive drive rise in the final moments of a close Overwatch match? I'm willing to concede that video games give me an outlet for aggressive impulses, a sensation that is virtually identical to emotions I felt during matches of soccer in high school, or when venting to a friend after a hard day at work. After playing some violent or action-packed games, I do feel an aftereffect. I feel refreshed and energized, and happy that I have a hobby that provides an avenue to explore feelings of anger and frustration. Likewise, from my childhood until now, video games have also proven a safe space to explore competition, power, beauty, interpersonal conflict, and the nature of narrative. Are we moved by games to emotions of all kinds? I think so, and it's one of the things I love about the medium.

Are there reasons parents might keep children away from certain video games? Of course! Like virtually any form of entertainment or art, parents make decisions all the time to limit exposure to adult content they feel their kid might not be ready to encounter or process. Much of the video game industry even helps with this decision-making process through content guideline systems like the ESRB.

Recent studies roundly reject the idea that video game play leads to real-world violence

We don't know with certainty what causes a person to lash out, but other countries clearly have policies in place that make a difference. Many of those countries have active game scenes, including culturally similar places like Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom, yet nowhere near the rate of gun violence that we see in the United States. Notably, all those nations have more stringent gun-control laws than in the United States. Would similar laws work in our country? The reality is that we simply don't have as much evidence as we'd like, as the NRA's leadership and politicians that support the organization actively hinder attempts to study gun violence. Instead of supporting that kind of research, or enacting any of the common sense measures that might help curb violence, many partisans are still under the misapprehension that they can target video games, because those lazy basement-dwelling video game players are never going to be an active voting bloc, anyway. Right?

It's time for a new refrain. It's time to lay to rest a tired and feckless argument that attempts to scapegoat an entertainment medium rather than confront the real problems at hand. While everyone is entitled to find certain books, movies, or sports distasteful and to choose a different form of entertainment, presuming that entertainment causes real-world violence has been roundly discredited. And that begs the question – when someone claims to find truth in such an apparent misrepresentation, what must we conclude about the speaker? ◆

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

opinion

The Importance Of Seeing Confident Women In Video Games

by Kimberley Wallace, Features Editor

Strong female role models didn't abound while I was growing up in the '80s and '90s, and this applies to all forms of media. Many female characters felt shoehorned into the story for marketing purposes or as eye candy while their male counterparts stole the spotlight. Video games weren't exactly teeming with the best representations; Terra Branford stands out as one of the more positive ones. And while Lara Croft was empowering, she was also turned more into a male fantasy than a person. Princess Peach and Zelda served as damsels in distress who frequently needed saving. Film and TV didn't do me any favors, either. She-Ra and Princess Leia were about as good as it got. In fact, I didn't even grow to appreciate Leia's strength until the more recent movies where she leads the Resistance with such grace and dignity. I often wonder if I saw a powerful lead like Rey, defeating villains and rescuing allies with the power of the Force, if my viewpoint would be different.

My earliest gaming memory of the impact of a leading woman on-screen is Parasite Eve's Aya Brea. During a small moment in the opera scene when all hell breaks loose, Aya pushes her date aside, says she'll handle it, and charges straight into the action. She's merely a NYPD rookie, but that doesn't stop her from trusting her instincts and risking her life to find answers. It was rare for me to see a woman trust in her own abilities to get the job done, especially without needing a man by her side. It's stuck with me to this day.

Now that I'm older, I've been re-evaluating how I've come to be the person I am and where I can improve. I keep going back to my childhood; I've certainly had more opportunities to seize than my mother, grandmother, and generations prior, but I still frequently feel like a second-class citizen. I was never encouraged to speak out or be expected to have the right answer. I was not taught to celebrate my talents or acknowledge my worth. These problems are not exclusive to women, but they're much more common in women for a reason. It's learned behavior, a symptom of societal roles.

As explained in Susan Golombok and Robyn Fivush's book *Gender Development*, boys tend to obtain more attention than girls in the classroom, and collect more praise for their knowledge and correct answers. Girls receive reinforcement for compliance and are more likely to be reprimanded for incorrect answers. Research by psychologists cited in Golobok and Fivush's book showcases that by the time children are in fourth and fifth grade, "90 percent of positive feedback given to boys is for their intellectual performance, but less than 80 percent of praise given to girls is for intellectual performance." This echoes my experiences as a young girl.

Self-confidence is an important, yet difficult, skill to learn. That's why I love Aloy from Horizon Zero Dawn. Here's a young woman who knows her capabilities and speaks out when people doubt her. She's lived a life of an outcast, treated as if she's nothing, and yet she still sees her value and believes in her ability to do great things. Playing Horizon Zero Dawn, I felt inspired – I couldn't get away from how refreshing it was to see her speak confidently at every turn, never second-guessing when confronted.

Horizon Zero Dawn's Aloy

Wolfenstein II's Grace Walker

After I kept being impressed by this part of her, I started to think more about it and became solemn. Shouldn't this be something I'm used to seeing by now? Why is it striking? I have a friend who doesn't understand my love for Aloy, and I suspect it's because he has seen male leads express this type of confidence his entire life. I want this sort of female character to be more commonplace and not something that stands out when I play a game, but it speaks loudly when so few female characters possess these abilities.

I'm happy to see developers taking more chances in this area. The Last of Us' Ellie quickly became one of my favorite characters in 2013. When you finally control her during the winter section, it portrays her coming into her own and becoming confident enough to take care of herself. The coming-of-age moment is awesome. The Left Behind DLC made her even more interesting by exploring her identity as a young queer woman. The first game was very much Joel's story, so I'm looking forward to seeing how Naughty Dog explores her more in-depth by letting her lead the narrative in the sequel.

Naughty Dog also took a chance by letting Chloe Frazer take the reins from Nathan Drake and star in her own Uncharted adventure, teaming her up with the headstrong Nadine Ross. Seeing these two women grow, learn from each other, and make a name for themselves in a male-dominated trade was exciting in its own right. Another powerful example is Wolfenstein II's Grace Parker. As a no-nonsense black woman, she was not only a confident leader but basically the brains behind the general operation of the Resistance Network. Her group went to her for answers and a plan, trusting her blunt honesty and unequivocally embracing her talents. Not to mention, she's doing all of this while rearing a child, something often not depicted on screen. The fact that these traits are a rare sight for women in video games is sad, but the further lack of their presence in queer women or women of color is even worse. To be fair, Grace is just a side character in B.J. Blazkowicz's story. I can only think of a few striking leads in this vein, like Dishonored: Death of the Outsider's Billie Lurk, Assassin's Creed Liberation's Aveline de Grandpré, and Mirror's Edge's Faith.

My overarching point is when you're in an under-represented group, whether it's gender, race, or sexuality, portrayals in media can be extremely powerful and meaningful. This is especially important as the media we consume both shapes and reflects cultural stereotypes, something outlined by the The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Role models provide a blueprint for how we should behave; we mimic the virtues we see as successful. Therefore, it helps to see certain traits exemplified, and confidence is one attribute I find extremely valuable to see on screen. It sends the message that it's okay to stand up for yourself and be comfortable in your own abilities. As the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media puts it: "If she can see it, she can be it."

While gender representation has certainly improved, we still have a long way to go. A 2012 study conducted by Davis' institute still found troubling depictions of women across TV and film, with female characters often "sidelined, stereotyped, and sexualized in popular entertainment." The research concluded the only way to improve was for both genders to "see female decision-makers, political leaders, managers, and scientists as the norm, not the exception. By increasing the number and diversity of female leaders and role models on screen, content creators may affect the ambitions and career aspirations of girls and young women domestically and internationally." As recently as last year, the institute continued studies that found problematic portrayals of women, urging creators not to fall back on outdated stereotypes and show more women in leadership roles. My hope is that video game developers also take note of these findings and can also provide better female role models.

I wish I saw more empowered women growing up, so maybe it wouldn't have taken me so long to change my narrative about myself. I want us to be in a place where this isn't something that needs to be praised, but is just par for the course, the same way we view confident male protagonists. I'm not saying we need to insert these types of characters into every game. I don't want Mary Sues, either. I want multi-dimensional characters – diverse offerings that challenge our perspective and perception. I also want developers to be aware that seeing positive representations on screen has a great effect on other women. It wouldn't be realistic for all female characters to have certainty in their abilities, nor would it be for them to be flawless. People are more complex than that. I just wish seeing a confident woman in video games felt more familiar, and hope we see more to get to that point. ◆

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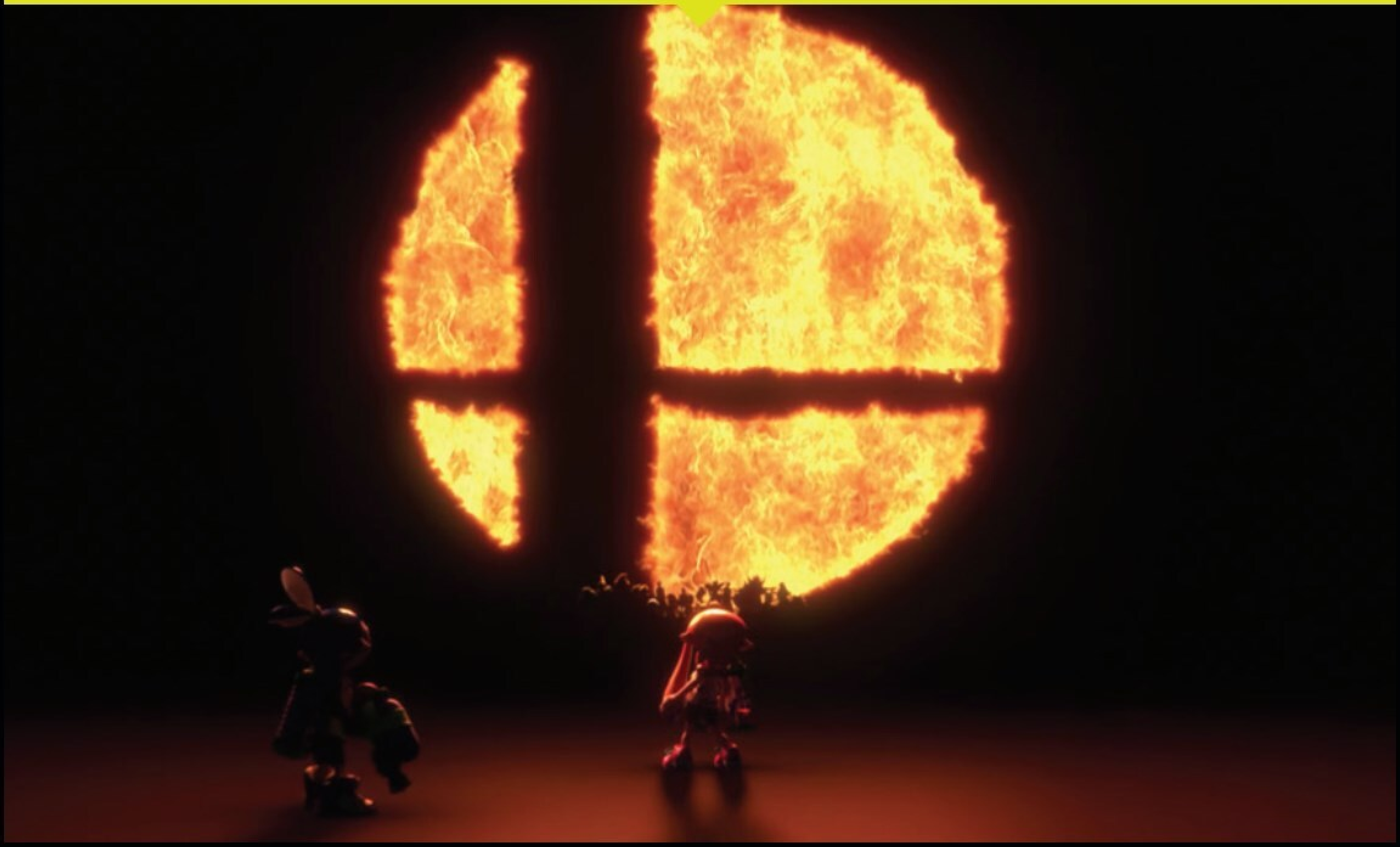
The Good



Nintendo announced the **SUPER SMASH BROS.** series is coming to Switch in 2018, with a recent teaser trailer showing Mario, Link, and the Inklings from the Splatoon franchise.

The Bad

MASS EFFECT SERIES WRITER Drew Karpyshyn has once again left EA studio BioWare after working on the company's 2019 shooter Anthem. Other high-profile talent including Mike Laidlaw (creative director, Dragon Age) and Aaryn Flynn (studio general manager) have already left the developer. Karpyshyn says he'll be concentrating on his novels and freelance gaming work.

Every **OCULUS VR** headset suddenly didn't work due to an expired software certificate. Users dug into the files to determine the possible culprit, which developer Oculus Rift then had to fix and send out an update the next day to resolve. To make good for the situation, Oculus sent out a $15 Oculus store credit. ◆

The Ugly

Quotable

> "Artifact is the first of several games that are going to be coming from us. So that's sort of good news. Hooray! Valve's going to start shipping games again."

Gabe Newell

May2018

GAME RELEASES

Friday 04
- Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze (Switch)

Tuesday 08
- Conan Exiles (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

Tuesday 15
- Dragon's Crown Pro (PS4)
- Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey Redux (3DS)

Friday 18
- Hyrule Warriors: Definitive Edition (Switch)
- Little Nightmares: Complete Edition (Switch)
- State of Decay 2 (Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 22
- Mega Man Legacy Collection (Switch)
- Mega Man Legacy Collection 2 (Switch)
- Tennis World Tour (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Thursday 24
- Dillon's Dead-Heat Breakers (3DS)

Friday 25
- Dark Souls Remastered (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- Detroit: Become Human (PS4)

Tuesday 29
- Everspace (PS4)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Wednesday 02
- Code Black (CBS)

Sunday 06
- Sweetbitter (Starz)

Friday 11
- Life of the Party (theaters)

Sunday 13
- Little Women (PBS)

Friday 18
- Deadpool 2 (theaters) ❷

Thursday 24
- Fauda (Netflix)

Tuesday 25
- Solo: A Star Wars Story (theaters)

Monday 28
- Six (History)

Tuesday 29
- 100 Code (WGN)

Wednesday 30
- American Ninja Warrior (NBC)
- Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (Netflix)

GAMER CULTURE

Tuesday 08

L.A. Games Conference

This intimate gathering of video game insiders features fireside chats, panels, roundtable discussions, and more. This year's topics range from discussing the future of esports to exploring the relationship between Hollywood and video games. L.A. Games Conference is held today in the W Hollywood Hotel.

Thursday 09

Justice League: No Justice ❸

In the wake of DC Comics' Dark Nights: Metal, a new generation of heroes has arisen, and the Justice League is no longer on Earth. In the first issue of Scott Snyder's Justice League: No Justice, the team is tasked to confront four giants that are devouring planets. DC calls this four-issue series its most "exciting, bombastic event of the summer."

Wednesday 16

Black Panther

If you loved the motion picture, Marvel is giving you a new jumping on point for the comics with Black Panther #1, penned by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and penciled by Daniel Acuña. In this issue, T'Challa is introduced to an expanded Wakanda, now poised to be an intergalactic empire.

Monday 21

Digital Dragons

The biggest game industry conference in Central Europe outside of Gamescom, this two-day event in Krakow features many speakers from Poland's flourishing game development scene, an indie showcase, and the Polish game awards.

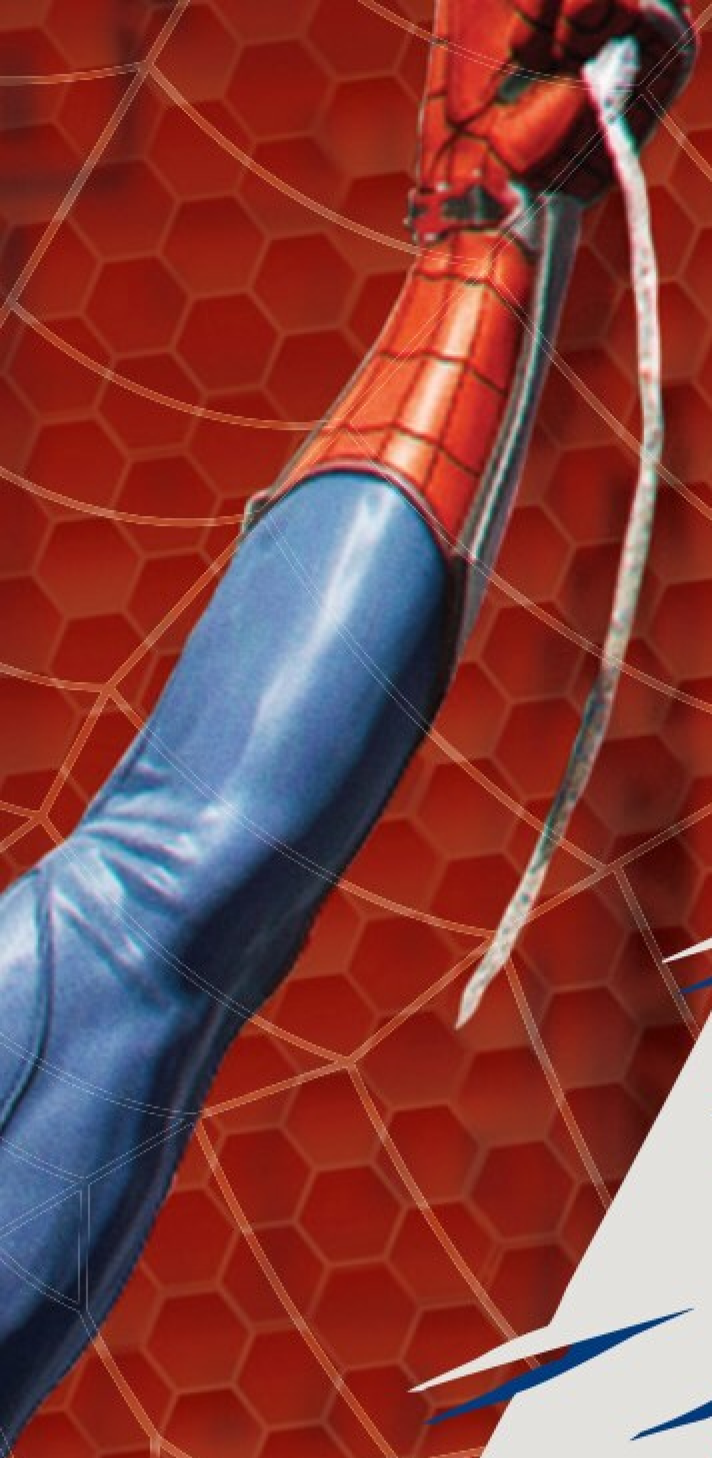
» PLATFORM
PS4

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Insomniac Games

» RELEASE
September 7



THE HERO WE NEED

WE GO HANDS-ON WITH SPIDER-MAN, AND DISCOVER AN OPEN WORLD OF WEB-SWINGING, COMBAT, RPG ELEMENTS, AND MORE

by Andrew Reiner

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Amazing! Spectacular! Sensational!

Each Spider-Man comic book cover tells the reader to expect something extraordinary. The artwork amplifies these commanding words, often showing the red-and-blue wall crawler soaring through the air, shooting webs, or pummeling evildoers. Just looking at the cover is an oddly exhilarating experience – a formula Marvel has successfully used since Spider-Man was first introduced in the 1962 comic book *Amazing Fantasy #15*.

Spider-Man's relevance has only grown stronger in the years that followed. He's on the silver screen, on your TV, and in so many comic book series even the most ardent fans can't keep them all straight. He just doesn't have much of a pulse in video games, even after several titles from yesteryear showed us he's a great fit for the medium.

Developer Insomniac Games hopes to change this narrative with its own interpretation of Spider-Man – one that adheres to the decades of comic-book history fans have come to expect, but also explores narrative territory they wouldn't. The fantasy every Spider-Man fan wants harks back to those comic book covers – snapshots of Spider-Man doing amazing things transformed into fluid gameplay. Insomniac delivers that Spider-Man dream, but isn't afraid to focus on the man under the mask. The studio also wants players to get to know Peter Parker, who deals with the issues many of us face every day: relationships, finances, and just being a decent human being.

Almost every person I talked to from Insomniac and Marvel echoed one sentiment: The best Spider-Man stories are when Peter Parker and Spider-Man's worlds collide. Peter gets a lot of face time in this game; you're going to see the web-swinging action slow to a crawl to focus on his life. We got our hands on Spider-Man, and were shown just how Insomniac is trying to create interesting gameplay and moments for both the hero and the man. It all begins with an unexpected ending.

DAILY BUGLE

New York City is vividly detailed, featuring both real world and comic book landmarks

SUITING UP

Viewed from a certain lens, New York City's skyline is a showcase of wealth and power. These billion-dollar towers lift the sinful fat cats and corrupt politicians closer to the heavens they'll likely never occupy. They rule this city. They believe they are untouchable at this height. That was before the arrival of capes, spandex, and a 23-year-old struggling to pay his rent.

Peter Parker has the power to clean up this city. In the eight years he's been Spider-Man, he's tangled with these tyrants, chipping away at their empires in a seemingly endless dance of violence and destruction. Today, one of them will finally fall and bring closure.

The first seconds of the game focus on a black spider twisting and turning as it descends on a thin line of silk in front of an open window, backed by vibrant sunlight. The camera slowly pans to the right, giving us enough time to see a series of photographs, the first showing the smiling faces of Aunt May and Uncle Ben, and a second a glimpse of a youthful Peter sitting with friend Harry Osborn and ex-girlfriend Mary Jane Watson.

We then see Peter's entire life come into focus in just a few seconds, moving from an old police scanner he uses to track crime, to a plant that appears to have died from lack of water, to a notebook with illustrations of web shooters and new gadgets, to a handful of *Daily Bugle* newspapers hanging precariously on the wall, each highlighting a different villain. The names and faces of Electro, Scorpion, Rhino, and Vulture are front and center.

The tight framing of this shot echoes Peter's lifestyle. He lives in a microscopic studio apartment, made smaller by a mess of clothing and food containers. You'd be hard-pressed to find one inch of this living space that isn't occupied.

Even in a partially awake state, Peter is quick to put on his web shooters, two high-tech devices he places on thin wristbands he nonchalantly wears about town. Before donning his costume – the iconic version from the comics with the black spider on his chest – he comically tosses two pieces of bread into the toaster and uses his webbing to snag them mid-air as they pop up, slightly browned. He scarfs down one piece, and suits up.

Before leaving his apartment, he sees another eviction notice under his door. He hesitates for a brief second, debating if he should do something about it, but then turns his gaze to the police scanner, which has come to life and is barking out chaos. In the distance he can hear the roaring of police sirens racing toward their target. The earpieces in his mask also carry the voice of Yuriko Watanabe, the police chief and friend who has a lead on Wilson Fisk.

Known in the criminal underground as Kingpin, Fisk has operated outside of the law, taking advantage of the inept bureaucracy of the city to gain considerable wealth and power. He hides high atop Fisk Tower, a massive landmark that flaunts the wealth of its owner with gaudy gold elevators, marble floors, and a giant, gold logo with heavy emphasis on the name Fisk.

Spidey has an unlimited supply of webbing, but his other gadgets are limited and must be resupplied

After watching Spider-Man soar between redbrick high-rises and run haphazardly along the side of a metal railing, I suddenly find myself in control of him. Had the game not paused to deliver my first instruction of "Press R2 to web swing" I likely would have watched him fall to the street. The transition between the cinematic and gameplay is seamless.

As Spider-Man's weight pulls him closer to the street crowded with taxis, moving trucks, and citizens on the sidewalks, a web rockets from his wrist and attaches to a building to his right. Spider-Man's momentum shifts into a long swing, concluding with him being launched high into the air. He spins every which way like a gymnast dismounting for a landing, gaining speed and height with each new web line that is thrown out. The sound of the wind howls as he moves across the city at a breakneck pace. Even though I just started playing seconds ago, the web swinging is easy to grasp. It has a nice rhythm and flow, giving me the precision needed to slide through narrow gaps.

Holding L3 sends Spider-Man into a headfirst dive, a move used to gain even more momentum. Hitting X at any point of a swing or dive sends out a different web – more of a zip or pull – that alters his trajectory quickly, but is more of a transitional move to ease navigation. It can be used to quickly dart around corners.

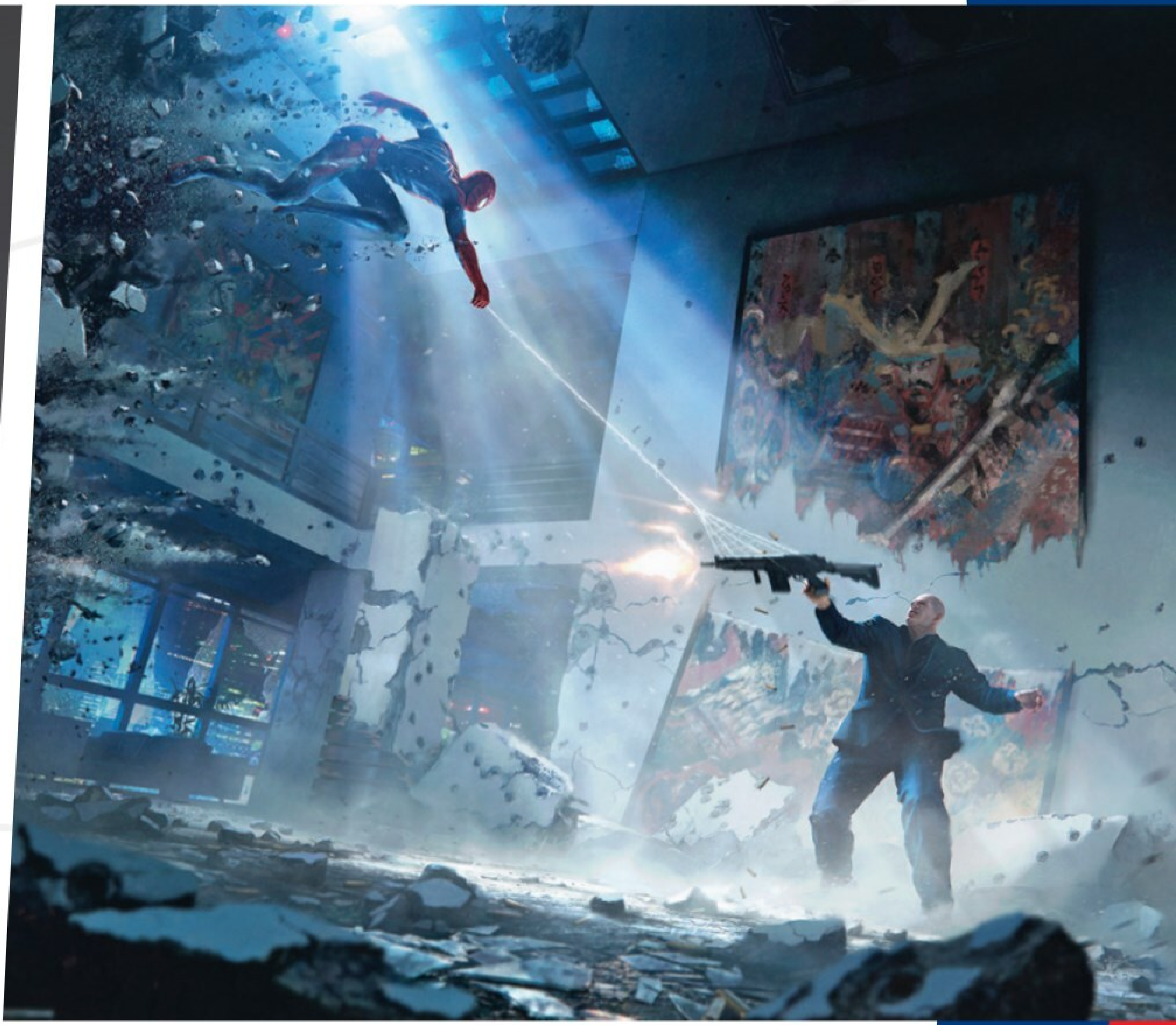
"He's eight years as Spider-Man, so he's fine-tuned his traversal methods," says Bryan Intihar. Intihar is Spider-Man's creative director, and a lifelong fan who remembers getting in trouble after wearing a Spider-Man costume under his clothing at school. "We didn't want to stop the players' momentum at all. If you slam into a building, you run along it or up it, depending on the angle," he adds. "When you get to the top, you have two options: You can just keep going, which will send you into a midair jump, or you time a button press at the top of the building to catapult you forward to keep your momentum going."

If you are too far above the buildings, or find yourself in the middle of nowhere, you can't swing in the traditional way. "If there's a building down below, you can attach a [downward] web to keep your flow going," says Ryan Smith, game director at Insomniac. "There's a physics aspect to all of it. It ends up being a different swing motion to get you back in range."

REDESIGNING SPIDEY'S COSTUME

Insomniac says the white spider logo on the front and back of Spider-Man's chest have meaning in the story, but wouldn't elaborate any more than teasing it may tie into his scientific career. The flow of the red and blue are based on the makeup of the human body.

"If you think about how functional athletic gear is, that's the same logic we applied to our suit," says Jacinda Chew, art director at Insomniac Games. "What it does to support you and allow flexibility, that's the same logic we used. You'll see our suit has a lot of paneling, like in athletic gear. One of the main things that's different about our suit than the classic is he no longer has a red boot. If you're a 23-year-old, you're probably not going to wear a red boot. We thought an athletic shoe would be more appropriate for someone that age. The other thing we did was think of the functionality of the suit. The blue is where [the suit allows] flexibility, and where he has the highest range of motion. Anything that is red is made out of a thicker material for armor reinforcement. It's where he might get hit the most, or where he might scrape against a building when swinging across the city."



FALL OF THE KING

The tranquility of soaring across the Big Apple doesn't last long, as a series of police cars dart onto the scene, giving Spider-Man a trail of flashing red and blue lights to follow. The destination is an intersection exploding with the sound of gunfire. Men dressed head-to-toe in black with hints of purple are opening fire on the police officers huddled behind their cars and vans. It's Kingpin's crew. They've taken the fight to the streets, blocks away from Fisk Tower. They're trying to slow the police to give their boss a better chance of slipping through their handcuffs. One of the gunmen holds up a radio and says, "Call in the hammer."

A red fuel truck approaches, and it isn't braking. Holding true to the name "hammer," the truck rams into the police barricade at such a force that the fuel tank is jettisoned and explodes. The police are knocked back, many now lying on the ground wondering what hit them. The gunmen use the moment of confusion to attack. They raise their guns to open fire, but soon realize they are holding nothing but air; a quick torrent of accurate web shots has disarmed the adversaries. Spider-Man lands at their feet, confident, and ready to fight.

This conflict serves as the combat tutorial, but I quickly learn Insomniac doesn't intend to ease the player into it. The team wants you to feel like a seasoned superhero right away, which is illustrated seconds after learning how to throw my first punch. "You're always looking for opportunities when you drop into combat," Intihar says. "You can attack one enemy on the ground, punch another into the air and continue the combat there, web down to another guy, swing kick another one, juggle another, bring out a gadget, look for an environment interaction. It starts with the basics of melee, but we really want to get you off of the ground to use your acrobatics, gadgets, and webs to feel like Spider-Man."

The combat sequence doesn't last long, but is loaded with gravity-defying feats. When airborne, Spider-Man can pummel foes with his fists, use his web shooters to spin them up, then smash them to the ground where they remain incapacitated in a giant web. Other web moves are used to throw manhole covers and trash cans to knock enemies over. As wildly animated as the combat is, most of the actions are handled with a button press or two, and the timing windows are not always immediate, providing space for contemplation on how to dispatch a threat.

Spider-Man moves fluidly, and can close the gap to his attackers with a web dash that puts him at their feet. His spider sense, which is illustrated with the iconic waveforms over his head, alerts him to incoming attacks, whether it's close-range or a gun about to be fired from afar. He bounces between enemies like a pinball, so swiftly at times that it can be difficult to truly survey the battlefield or keep tabs on enemy whereabouts, as many of them are tossed around with reckless abandon. Regardless of the occasional confusion, the combat mechanics feel great, and allow for a high level of choice.

By performing well, the player earns the chance to slow the combat flow to execute a finishing move by simultaneously pressing the triangle and circle buttons. These one-hit takedowns are elaborate, showcasing Spider-Man's wit and power through beautifully framed animation sequences. In one finisher, Spidey shoots two webs onto the ground, yet keeps them attached to his wrists to create a tight, elastic catapult to give him leverage as he plants his legs on the back of an enemy and smashes his face into the pavement.

Reinforcements arrive via a dump truck, which again is shown through a breakout cinematic. They open fire, but I can disarm them with a quick web shot. After dispatching the last foe with a wicked swing kick that sends him twirling into a parked car, the battle moves to the steps of Fisk Tower. Yuriko and her troops are under heavy fire, and in desperate need of back up. She calls it in and requests the airspace be secured. Spider-Man arrives at her side, exchanges a few pleasantries, and then vaults into action after she gives him a vocal "Do your

A quick prompt of spider sense alerts the player when to dodge. As Spider-Man powers up, he'll learn how to throw the missile back

THE MEN BEHIND THE MASK

Spider-Man is voiced by Yuri Lowenthal, the actor who plays Curt Connors (Lizard) in the new *Spider-Man* TV series, and was the Prince in Prince of Persia: Sands of Time. Peter Parker's face is modeled after actor John Bubniak.

Lowenthal says it's a dream come true getting to play Spider-Man. "The path to Spider-Man was interesting for me. [Insomniac] brought me in to do a test. There was no guarantee I would be Spider-Man. When they started doing the auditions, I think there was some pushback because, well, 'he's done other stuff for us, and we can't have him do Spider-Man because he just did [Sunset Overdrive].' I just assumed I would somehow get vetoed, and it would go to somebody else. When I got it, it was one of those red-letter days. It's been fantastic. I grew up with Spider-Man."

thing" sign of approval. Spider-Man gives her an excited fist pump in return.

He enters Fisk Tower by using one of Kingpin's goons as a battering ram to smash through the lobby's massive window. The chatter of gunfire erupts again, but is snuffed out by various objects transformed into projectiles. Spider-Man swings them wildly in wide arcs over his head, and it's up to the player to pinpoint which foe will catch it with his teeth. At first glance, Fisk Tower appears to be modeled after Trump Tower, but Insomniac says that isn't the case. "If you look at the design of Fisk Tower, it feels a bit royal," says Jacinda Chew, art director at Insomniac. "There's gold in there, and his people are wearing purple. [Fisk] is also into Japanese culture, so there's a zen aesthetic to the build as well. You'll see things like bamboo plants, Japanese art, and samurai armor."

Yuriko instructs Spider-Man to get to the top of the building. Seconds later, the power to the elevators goes out – a problem for the police, but not for someone who can climb walls. Spider-Man briskly sprints up the interior elevator shaft, but finds himself at another impasse on a higher floor.

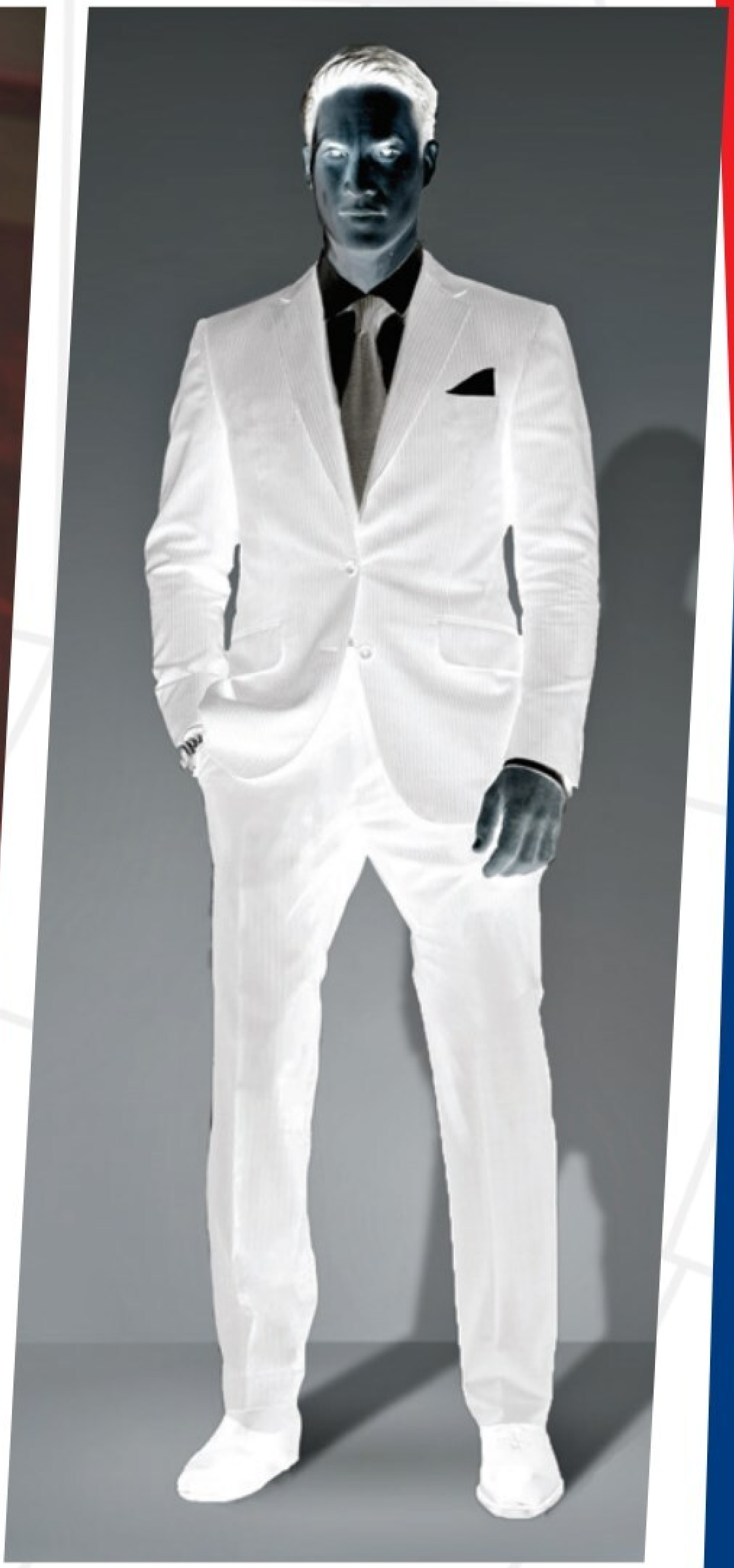
Pressing R3 allows me to scan the environment. In this instance, the only thing of note is a ceiling vent just large enough to hold a person, illuminated with a vibrant gold hue. "Looks like my own private ventrance," Spidey quips, as he crawls into it. In this tight space he receives a call from his aunt. His worlds are colliding at the wrong time. She immediately questions what the background noise is, and Peter awkwardly says he's watching superhero movies, but will need to get back to her.

Yuriko issues the alert that Fisk is wiping his servers to destroy evidence. Spider-Man's mission shifts to salvaging the data. A giant display is positioned over the computer, projecting a countdown timer that comically ticks down to the data being destroyed. I have to act quickly to dispatch an onslaught of foes and race over to the terminal to stop the process and retrieve the data on a USB stick.

Kingpin's hired help gives Spider-Man a run for his money, but their numbers are quickly whittled away, prompting the angry face of Wilson Fisk to appear on the monitor, looking 100 times the giant he already is. He taunts Spider-Man, and the screen – both in the game and in my demo – fades to black.

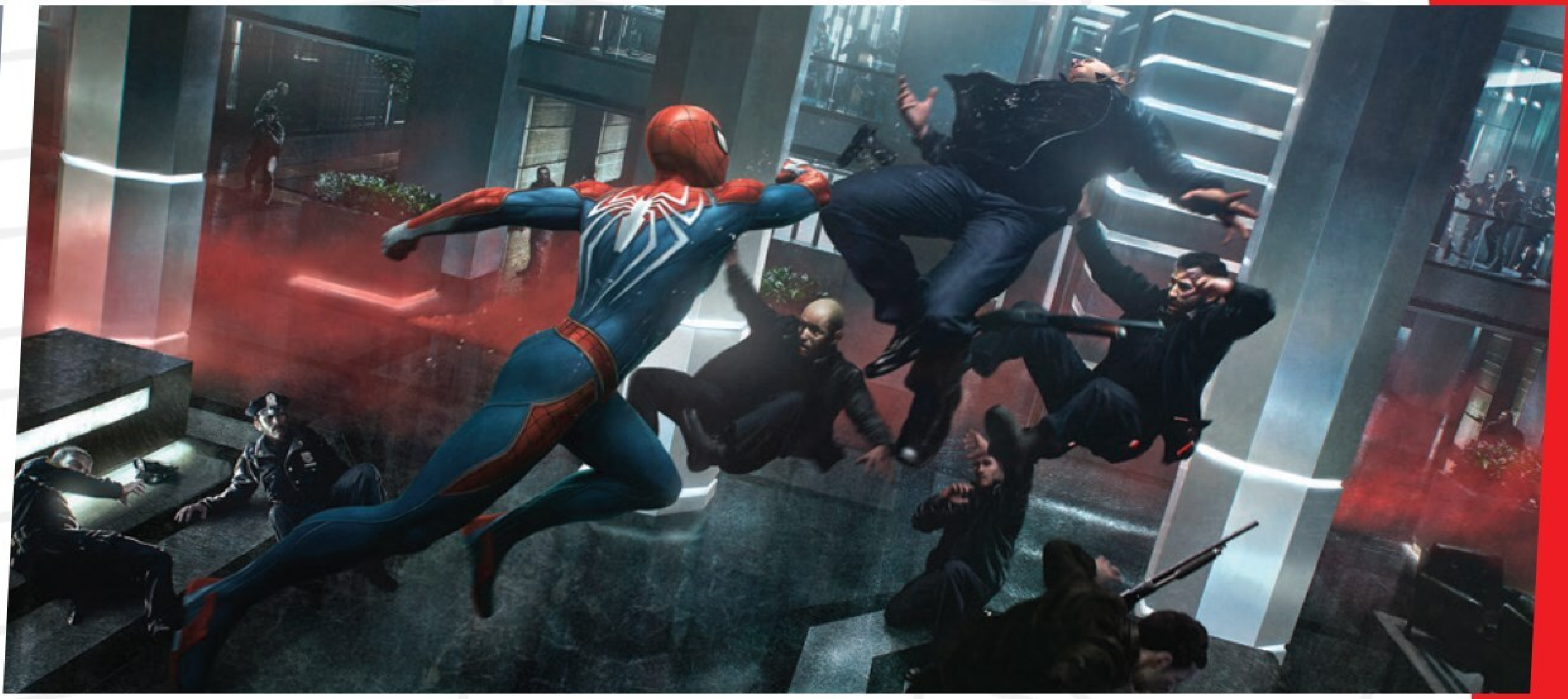
Insomniac didn't want to show us what would happen next, but did give us a look at the outcome of this mission. We see Fisk's hands behind his back in cuffs. After eight years of conflict, Spider-Man finally brought him down. As Fisk is loaded into the back of a van, he warns Spider-Man he'll miss having him around. It'll take just one month, but he'll end up missing the relationship they had.

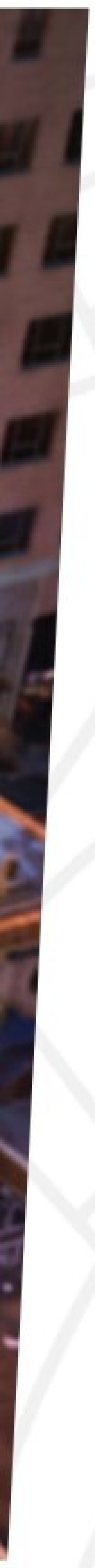
This sequence shows Insomniac doubling down on this being a new Spider-Man story. The first mission brings the sense of closure you normally find at the end of most stories. It also produces uncertainty for what will happen next. For Spider-Man, he thinks he's done the city a big favor and has helped restore order to it. What he doesn't know is that, with Kingpin's tyrannical reign over, it opens the floodgates for other villains to rise to power.



THE CITY NEVER SLEEPS INITIATIVE

Once players have completed the main story, Insomniac is committed to keeping them engaged. The team's "City Never Sleeps Initiative" brings numerous drops of post-release content, each featuring a villain, unique storyline, missions, challenges, and suits. The first one is called The Heist, and focuses on Black Cat set in a museum. No pricing models were given for this DLC, but Insomniac says there won't be any microtransactions for crafting materials or other in-game items. In fact, creative director Bryan Intihar said "hell no" to the possibility of microtransactions.





HERO DUALITY

For the time being, however, Peter has every right to celebrate. This is the point in his life he thinks he can finally find balance. His nemesis is behind bars in Ryker's Correctional Facility, Aunt May is making a difference in the world with her work at a F.E.A.S.T. shelter, and he's doing what he loves: working as a scientist for a company Intihar won't reveal until the game ships.

Insomniac gave us a glimpse at Peter's relationship with his aunt through a story clip set in the early moments of the game. Peter and Martin Li, the philanthropist who opened the F.E.A.S.T. shelters, are preparing for a surprise party for May. Peter shows up late, and his aunt is already there, well in advance of the decorations being hung. Her presence complicates matters, but gives us a glimpse at just how awkward Peter can be out of the costume. The player controls Peter in this instant, able to interact with people and items in the environment.

In a comical exchange, Peter tries to keep May distracted as Li and other people hang signs and balloons in the background. He tells his aunt he just wants to talk, which ends up being a bad idea, since she immediately asks if he's in trouble, needs money, or if he is having girl troubles again. That last train of thought rolls into May wishing Peter and Mary Jane would have worked things out because they would have made such "beautiful bab–. " Peter wisely cuts her off. He and M.J. have been on-again and off-again for years, but they haven't spoken in over six months.

Peter changes the subject to thank his aunt for all she's done for him. Li echoes the sentiment, and says May was the person who in part inspired him. They spin her around to the applause of everyone in the room. Li toasts her for all of the work she's done.

This story sequence plays out slowly, and is reminiscent in its visual direction and cinematic presentation to Naughty Dog's Uncharted series. The characters aren't just standing motionless. They move around and interact with each other and the environment in natural ways – little touches that seem trivial but give the story sequences a believable quality.

Although we didn't see Mary Jane in a game sequence, we did view several images of her. We learn she isn't the same person we know from the comic books. She knows Peter is Spider-Man, and in a bit of a role reversal, she's the one who works at the *Daily Bugle* as an emerging investigative journalist. "What we're really excited about is M.J.'s arc is more than just cutscenes," Intihar says. "She's a playable character at certain points, each with unique missions and gameplay mechanics."

In a familiar-looking shot from Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* film, we see Spider-Man dangling upside down on a line directly in front of M.J. This sequence won't end with a kiss – she's giving Spider-Man orders.

"Like most of us, she started at the bottom, and she's really got to work her way up," adds Jon Paquette, lead writer at Insomniac. "She has to pay her dues. It's serendipitous that she has Spider-Man next to her and the stories kind of follow him, right? She's got a partner there, but it is also a complicated relationship. It's hard for them because they both love each other. They've been boyfriend and girlfriend in the past, but they're both really focused on their careers."

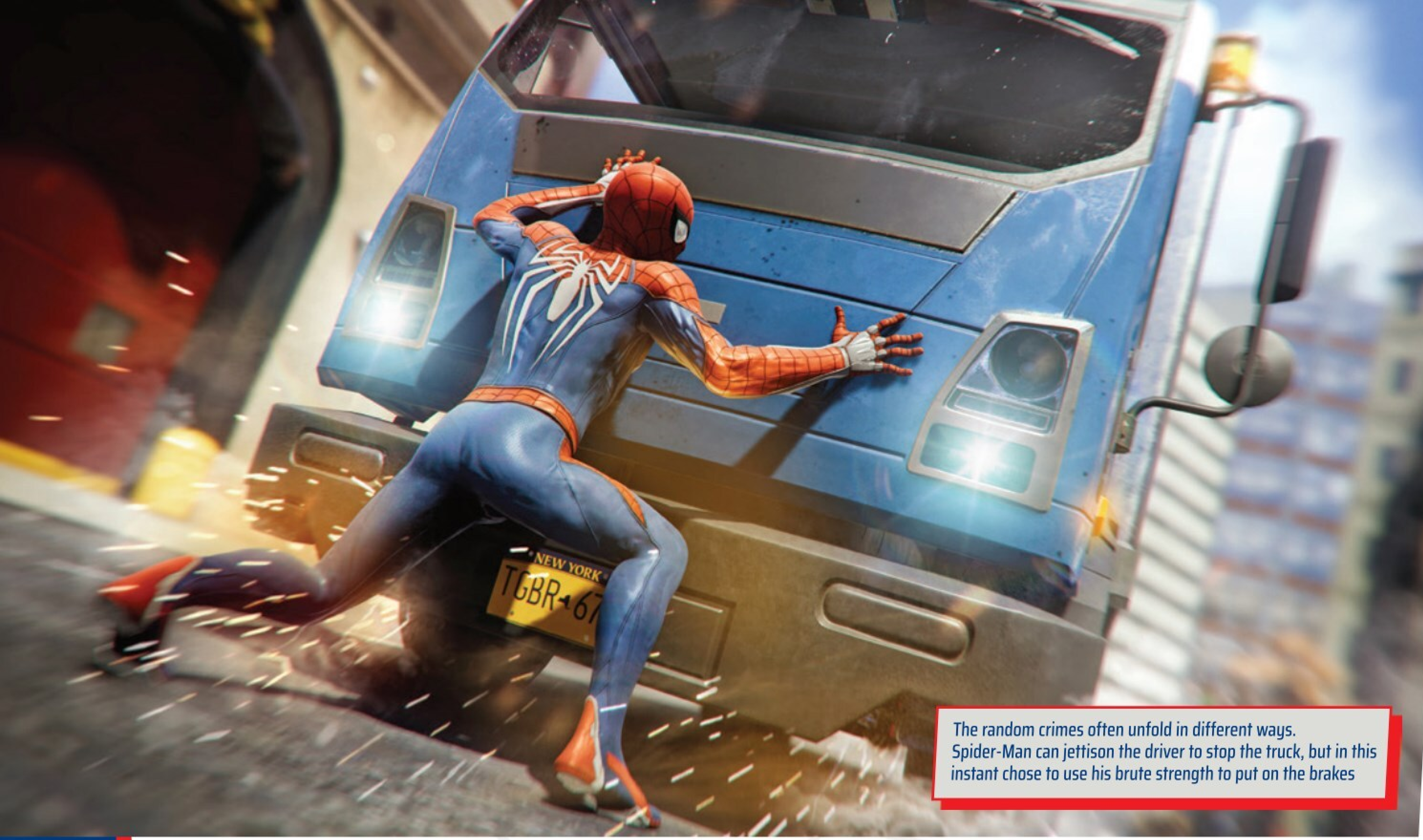
Another relationship that emerges through the course of the game is with Miles Morales, who in the comics becomes Spider-Man. In this game, he's a 15-year-old Spider-Man fan whose life becomes intertwined with Peter's. The Osborn family is also present. Harry is overseas, yet stays in touch with Peter. Harry's father, Norman, rode the success of Oscorp to become New York City's mayor. At the time of this game, he's up for reelection.

Many of these relationships sound a bit precarious; none more than one he shares with Li. When investigating a lead as Spider-Man, Peter learns Li, one of the nicest people he knows, can transform into Mister Negative, a villain who takes on the color of a photographic negative, has superhuman strength and reflexes, and can project negative energy like an oddly colored laser beam. He can also corrupt people, giving them negative energy, or drain their life essence to enhance his powers.

Li is the leader of a group called the Inner Demons, masked adversaries who are far more formidable than Kingpin's crew due to their negative weapons and abilities. They are rising to power quickly – targeting both Kingpin's remaining strongholds and the hardworking people of the city. They want to destroy the Big Apple. We don't see much of Li in our demo, but we do know he's working fast, and he won't let Spider-Man stop him.

EXPLORING THE OPEN WORLD

Insomniac's version of New York City is a sprawling playground for Spider-Man to web swing across and climb, offering the verticality to stretch out his powers and the intimacy to ground his human side. In my hands-on time, I began by casually walking down the sidewalk, blending with the locals. They know him, and have accepted him as their own. One man yells, "What up, G?!" when I cross the street. A woman on the sidewalk wants to take a photo with me. I accept the request and pose with her for a shot. Other people show no interest in me, and are going about their business, some talking to one another, others are selling food or shopping.



The random crimes often unfold in different ways. Spider-Man can jettison the driver to stop the truck, but in this instant chose to use his brute strength to put on the brakes

I veer off a main street into a small park with grass, trees, and a basketball court. A couple of squirrels dart past me just as I attach a web line to a basketball. After spinning it over my head a few times, I try to hit a three-pointer, but miss terribly. I point finger-guns at the people on the court and take to the skies. The city is enormous, and densely packed with objects and life – none of it disappears when viewed from a distance. My aimless exploration takes me by Grand Central Station, and I earn experience points for discovering a landmark. When enough experience is gained, Spider-Man levels up. Each level awards him skill points that can improve his abilities, such as a boost move that launches him faster and longer from a perched position. The speed of swinging can also increase with points.

My exploration of the city reveals The Avengers exist in this continuity – at least their tower is present. Intihar wouldn't say if any members of the team would make cameos or be featured in any way. The same answer applies to owners of other famed Marvel universe locations like Dr. Strange's Sanctum Sanctorum, and Black Panther's Wakanda Embassy, both of which look fantastic. New York City may be different due to the comic book influence, but Insomniac is adhering to the basic structure of the city. "We looked at satellite data," Chew says. "Central park is where you'd expect it to be. The financial district is where it should be. By mashing the [the real locations and comic locations] together, I think New York feels like it should."

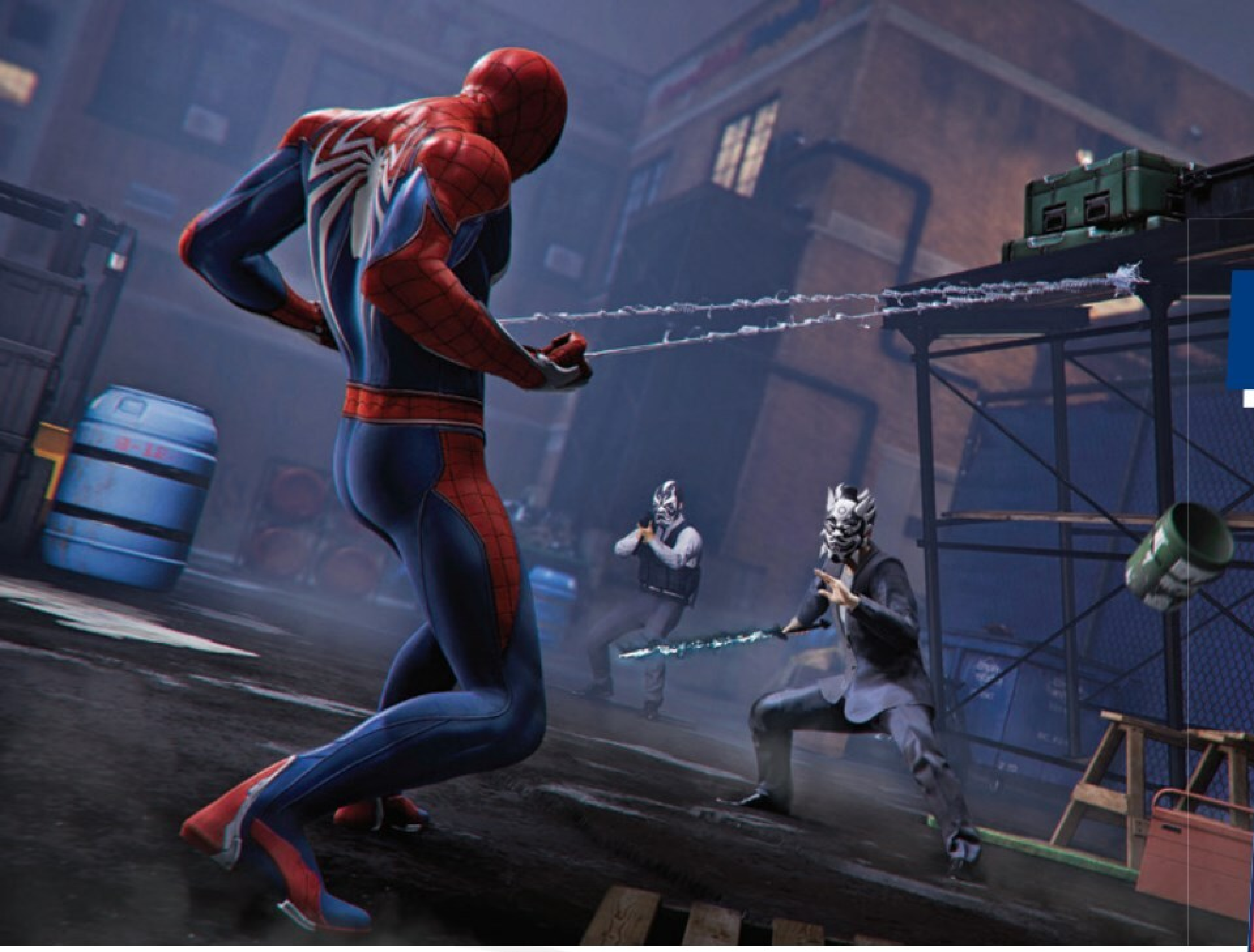
The mini-map in the lower left-hand corner shows the street layout and also highlights side activities, of which there are many, and more are added as the game unfolds. The first one I stumble upon is a scavenger hunt. I just have to locate one of Peter's old backpacks, which he webbed up in a secret location. I use the environment scan to locate it, and pull it down with a web. The backpack contains an image of one of Spider-Man's first web shooters. Intihar says that in the final game, the backpack items help flesh out Spider-Man's backstory with audio recordings.

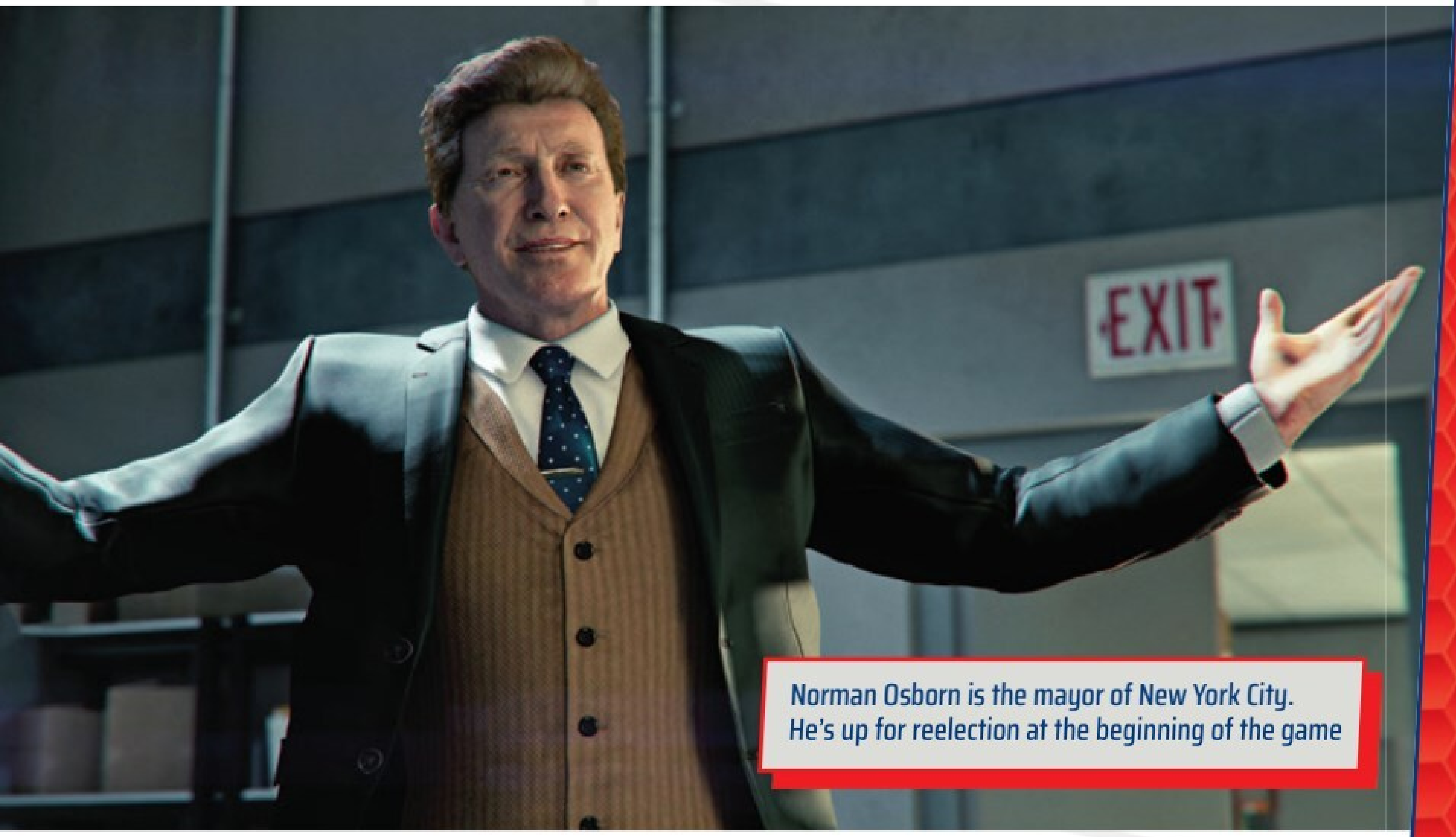
As I take to the skies again, I ping the environment and a series of colored icons appear. These are the activities that are near me. I can also press the touchpad to bring up the map to see everything, or place a waypoint on a destination. If a desired locale is on the other side of the map, I can fast travel, but I have to find a subway entrance to do this. After descending its stairs, Spider-Man rides the train nonchalantly, surfing his cellphone as he stands with other New Yorkers. Insomniac is creating a number of vignettes like this for fast travel, some tailored for specific things that happen in the game.

A nearby rooftop holds a challenge from little-known villain Taskmaster, who I only see a headshot of. His mask is made of metal, much like Doctor Doom's, but he still wears a hood over it, much like his comic counterpart. He has tasked me to locate and deactivate three bombs scattered across the city in a short period of time. When a bomb is reached, Spider-Man tosses it off of the building and the player must rapidly press R1 to shoot out web blasts to detonate it, which ends with a satisfying fireball. The webbing actually encases the bomb. The more webbing you apply, the higher your point total. When the task is completed, a statistic screen appears showing me how I fared. It also provides two bonus objectives. Completing the missions grants me a crafting component. Had I completed all of the objectives, I would have earned more.

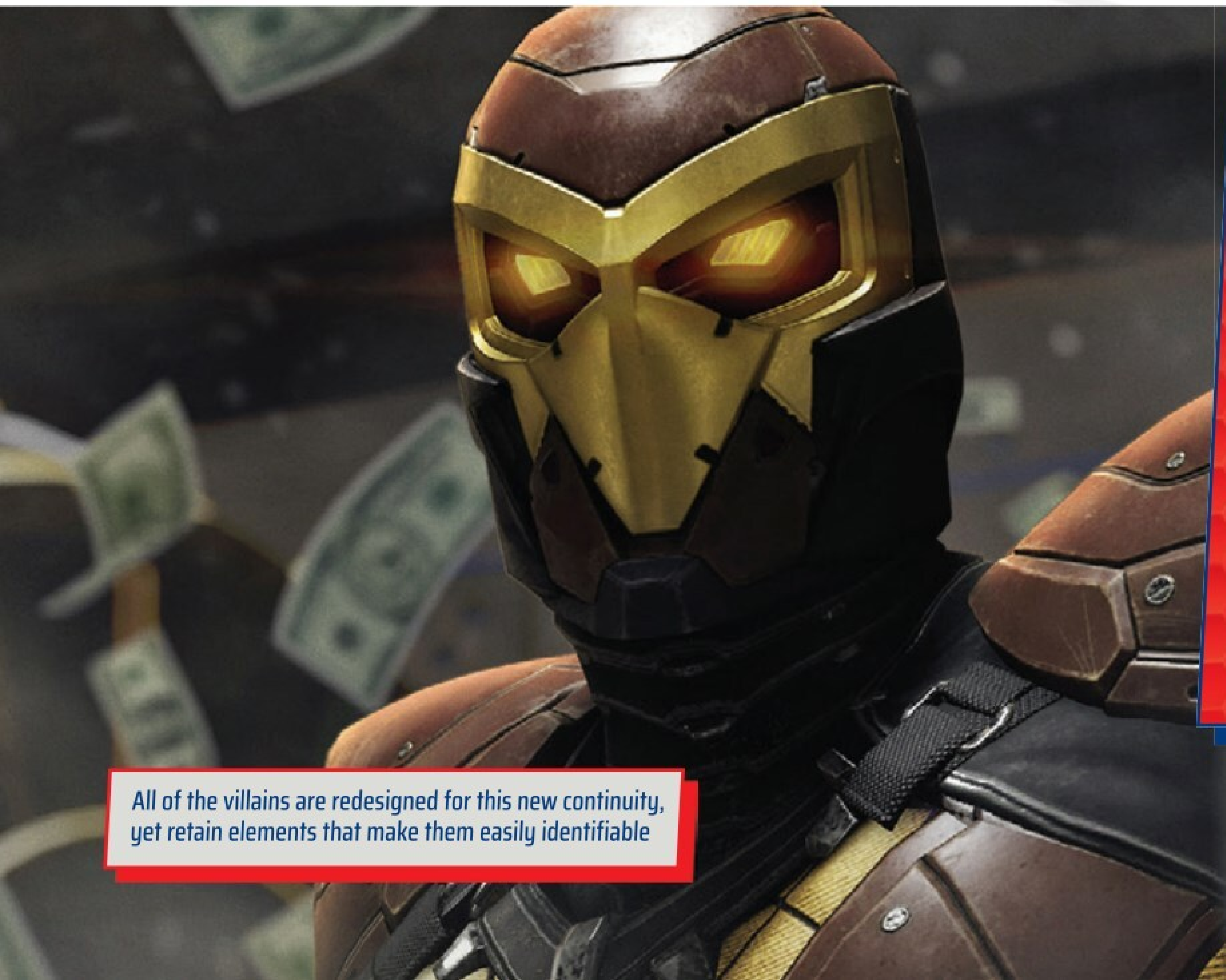
The crafting materials are used in a number of ways. Since Peter is a scientist, he makes and upgrades all of his own gadgets. He can also craft new suits. Insomniac is proud of its new take on Spider-Man's suit, but it wants players to be the Spider-Man they have in their heads – and it extends far beyond his look. "With the tech system, we wanted to make sure players have choices in terms of which gadgets or suit upgrades work best for their play style, so that they could customize their own Spider-Man experience," Smith says. "We focused on suits and gadgets because they represent a great opportunity for us to incorporate a part of Insomniac's heritage – making fun gadgets is one of the things we're known for – and combine it with Spider-Man's character in a way that naturally fit."

Intihar showed me a screen of a dozen-plus suit silhouettes, but quickly clarified that the number I was hastily trying to count wasn't accurate, and there would be many (see "Not Just One Suit" sidebar).



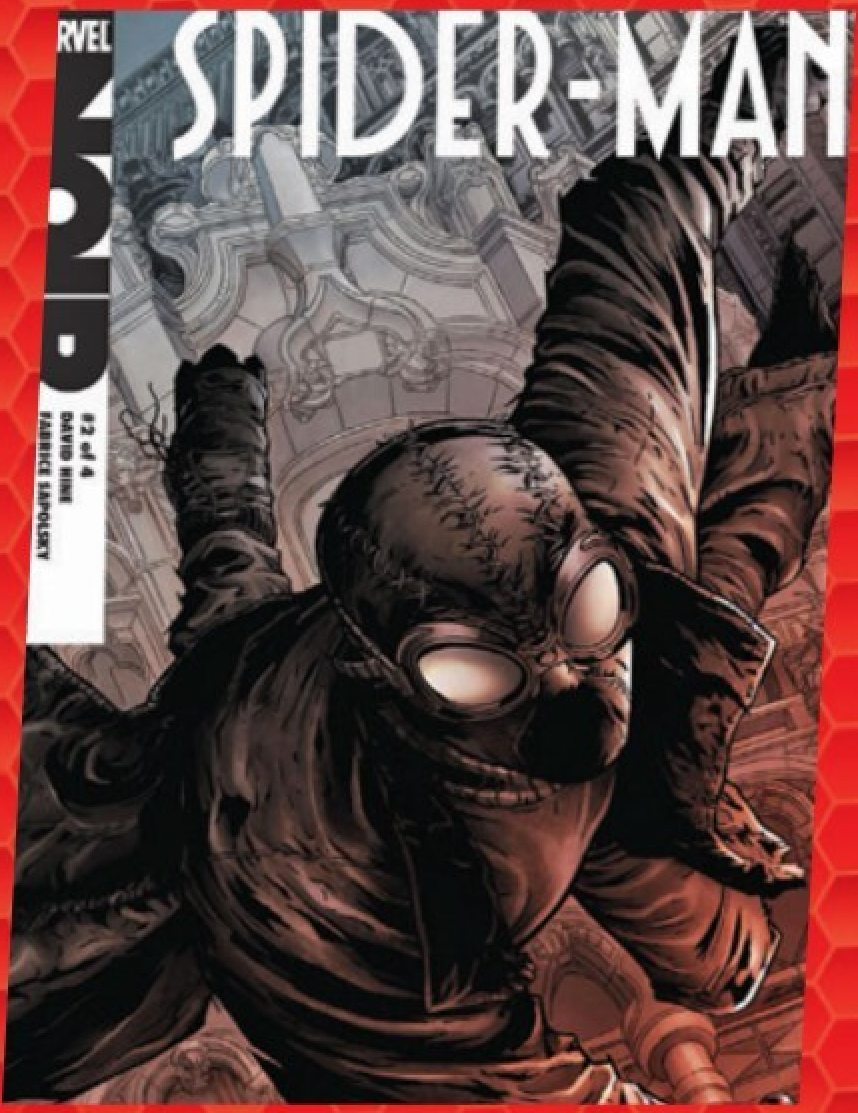


Norman Osborn is the mayor of New York City. He's up for reelection at the beginning of the game



All of the villains are redesigned for this new continuity, yet retain elements that make them easily identifiable

NOT JUST ONE SUIT



Along with Insomniac's "Advanced Suit," we saw three additional suits, most granting Spider-Man a unique, upgradeable power. If you like a particular suit's power, you can move it to another suit. Along with classic suits, Insomniac says it has designed several that have never been seen before.

THE CLASSIC

This familiar suit's power is quad-damage, which creative director Bryan Intihar says turns Spidey into a steamroller. When activated, his hands glow with fiery hues for a short amount of time.

NOIR

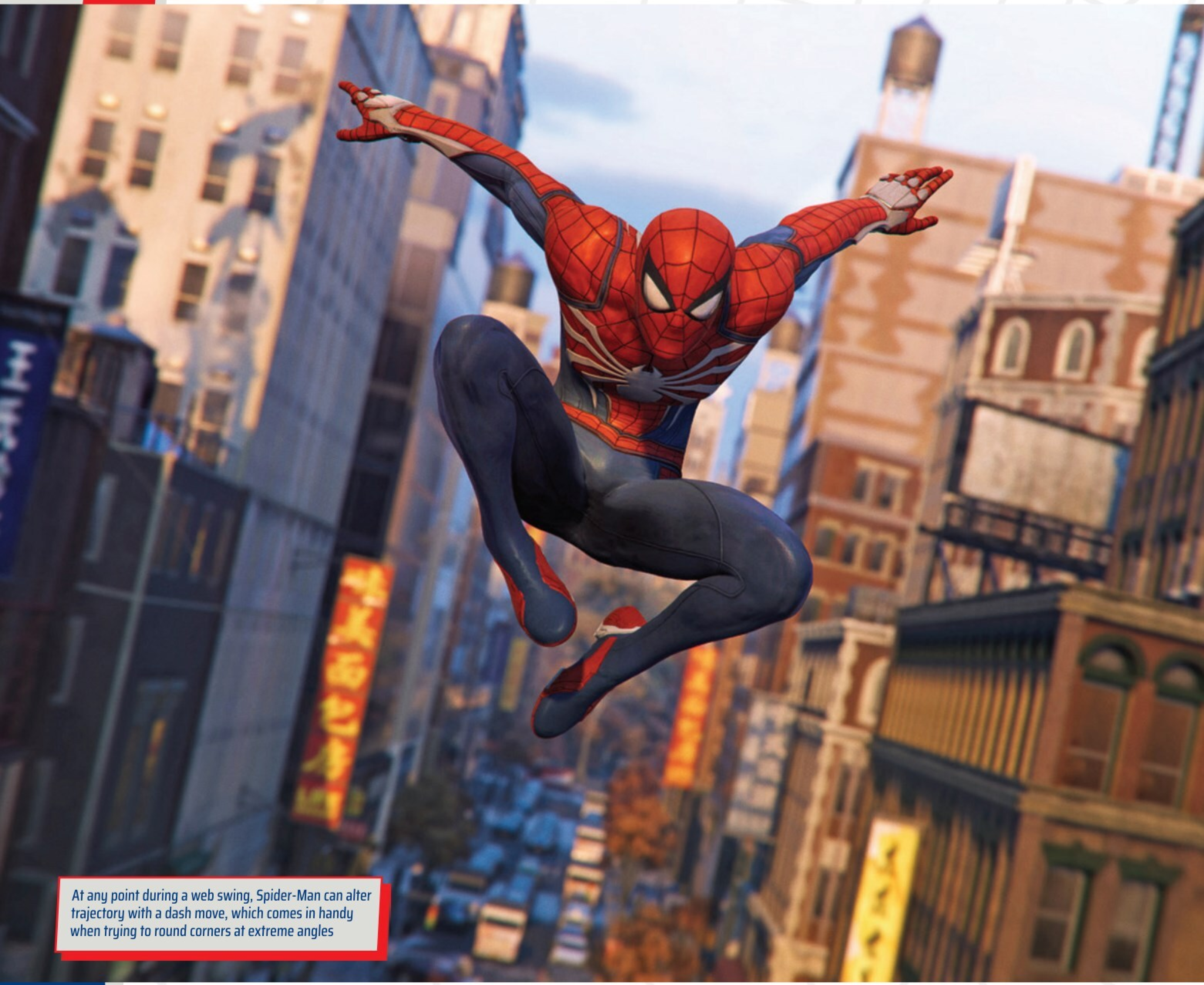
We played as this dark variation, but didn't see its power in action.

SPIDER-PUNK

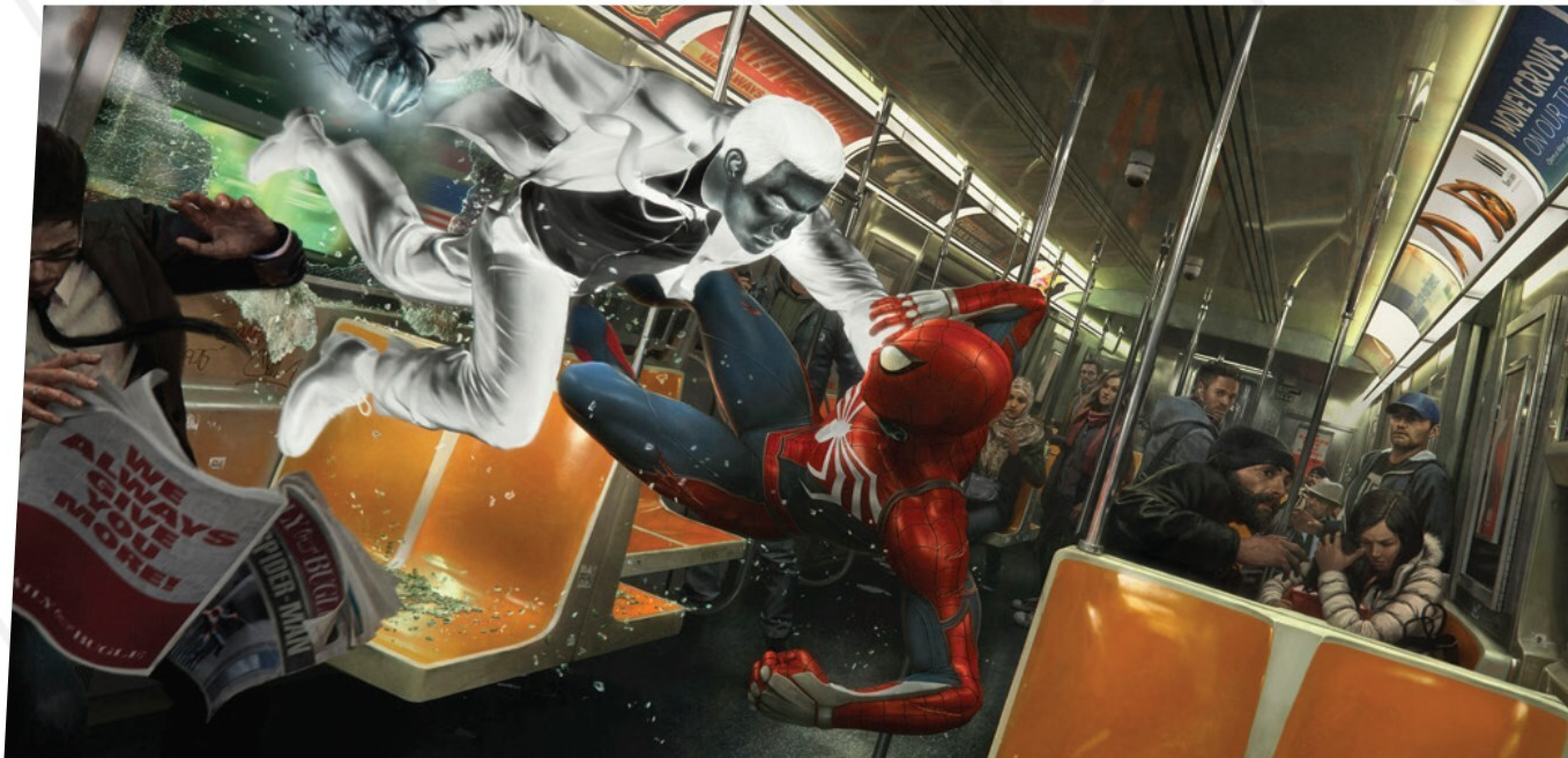
The classic suit is buried under a sleeveless jean jacket outfitted with a dozen-plus buttons. Spider-Man also has a mohawk of inch-long spikes on top of his head. This suit's special ability is quite odd, and seems to fit more with Sunset Overdrive. Spider-Man whips out a guitar and strums it to send out a spherical shockwave attack that knocks down all foes.

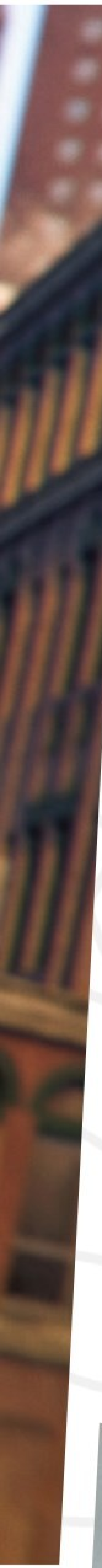
WRESTLING SUIT

We didn't see this suit in action, but did see an illustration of it on a wrestling poster in Peter's apartment that pits Spider-Man verses Crusher Hogan. Odds are we'll see this old-school suit in the game.



At any point during a web swing, Spider-Man can alter trajectory with a dash move, which comes in handy when trying to round corners at extreme angles


MONEY GROWS
WE ALWAYS GIVE YOU MORE!
SPIDER-MAN



SIDE QUESTING IN THE BIG APPLE

Other activities that reward the player with materials range from checking in on Harry Osborn's Oscorp Industries Research Stations (each leading Spider-Man to different mini-missions) to Black Cat Stakeouts, in which Spider-Man must hunt for golden cat statues outfitted with surveillance gear. I found a cat tucked in an open window. When I was in range, I used a camera to snap a photo of it.

The most challenging activity is tied to the Kingpin bases of note. Each of these locales is a hotbed of enemy activity. I approached a base high atop an unfinished skyscraper, and tried to use stealth to web up as many enemies as I could. I managed to wrap one heavily armed thug up into a web cocoon, but was spotted by the nearby guard. All hell broke loose, and a wave of enemies appeared onscreen. This encounter showed just how chaotic combat can be, as well as how crafty Spider-Man is in these instances. In keeping with most of Insomniac's games, the player can hold L1 to bring up a gadget wheel. In my demo, it contained three items: a trip wire, web bomb, and standard webbing. The trip wire is a good tool for stealth, as it can pull someone to a wall and contain them. The web bomb is used for crowd control, as it rises from the ground, explodes, and showers webs onto everyone nearby, stunning them.

Intihar also showed us the prototype of a fourth gadget: the Spider-Drone, a disc-shaped spider that hovers in the air and blasts out webs, sometimes incapacitating enemies.

Outside of the standard web shooters, these gadgets are not infinite in supply, so the player must be savvy in their use. I do my best to put them to good work, but find Spider-Man's acrobatic prowess to deliver the most satisfaction and success. As waves of enemies fall, more dangerous foes emerge, including a guard carrying a shield. He blocks most attacks, but if Spidey gets in close enough, he can dive under the brute's legs and pummel him from behind.

The final wave brings in the heat – an adversary armed with a rocket launcher. I'm told that later in the game Spider-Man can send rockets back at these attackers, but for now, good luck. I take the first rocket blast full on, and have to retreat to heal – a process handled by pressing down on the d-pad. This lifesaving maneuver drains my Focus meter, which I also use for finishers. My next attempt relies heavily on my spider sense to tell me when to dodge. I find a window to web zip over and launch the attacker off of the building. He tumbles a couple of stories before being pulled to the side of the building with webbing. Spider-Man doesn't kill, and the player doesn't have to worry about these moments – they are automatically webbed up. Spidey also can't harm civilians. He'll just give them high fives, or interact with them in silly ways.

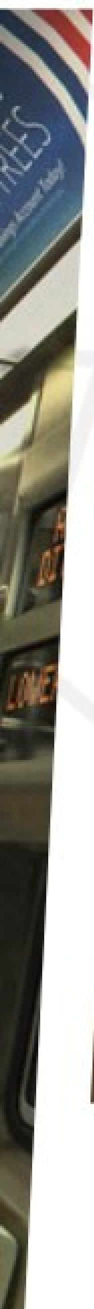
As I explore the city more, I notice a red warning sign appear on my map, signaling a random crime is unfolding. These events are completely optional, and there isn't a meter representing Spider-Man's standing in the city. The crimes range from storefront robberies to high-speed getaways, none lasting long if you play your cards right. The storefront robberies feature small interior spaces – we saw a convenience and jewelry store – which house maybe five or six criminals. As you engage them, one of the enemies may try to take off in a car, a dynamic switch in how the random event unfolds. If this happens, Spider-Man must land on the roof of the car to remove the driver – an action handled through a quick-time event – or find another way to stop it. He can also land on the hood with force, shoot out webs to the sides, and stop it dead in its tracks, the car's back wheels rising from the force.

After taking down a variety of challenges, a gold marker appears on my minimap, and I hear Yuriko say Shocker was spotted at the bank.

I arrive just in time to see him knock the giant, round door off of the bank's vault with two huge arm cannons. This version of Shocker looks a bit like Iron Man, decked out in jagged armor, yet still retaining the maroon and gold colors. He engages Spider-Man, but the sequence fades to black, and my time with the game ends.

Like the comic books that carry excitement on the covers, I walked away from Spider-Man with one word in mind: amazing. Insomniac Games is poised to do for Spider-Man what Rockstead did for Batman. This is a fresh-yet-familiar take on this beloved character that is hitting all of the right notes. I only experienced a small part of what will be in the final product, but what I played is exactly what I want from a Spider-Man game.

For more information on Spider-Man, including exclusive videos, developer interviews, and deeper insight into the gameplay, visit gameinformer.com/spiderman



» PLATFORM
PS4, Xbox One, PC

» STYLE
1-Player Simulation

» PUBLISHER
Frontier Developments

» DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

» RELEASE
June 12

BECOMING JOHN HAMMOND

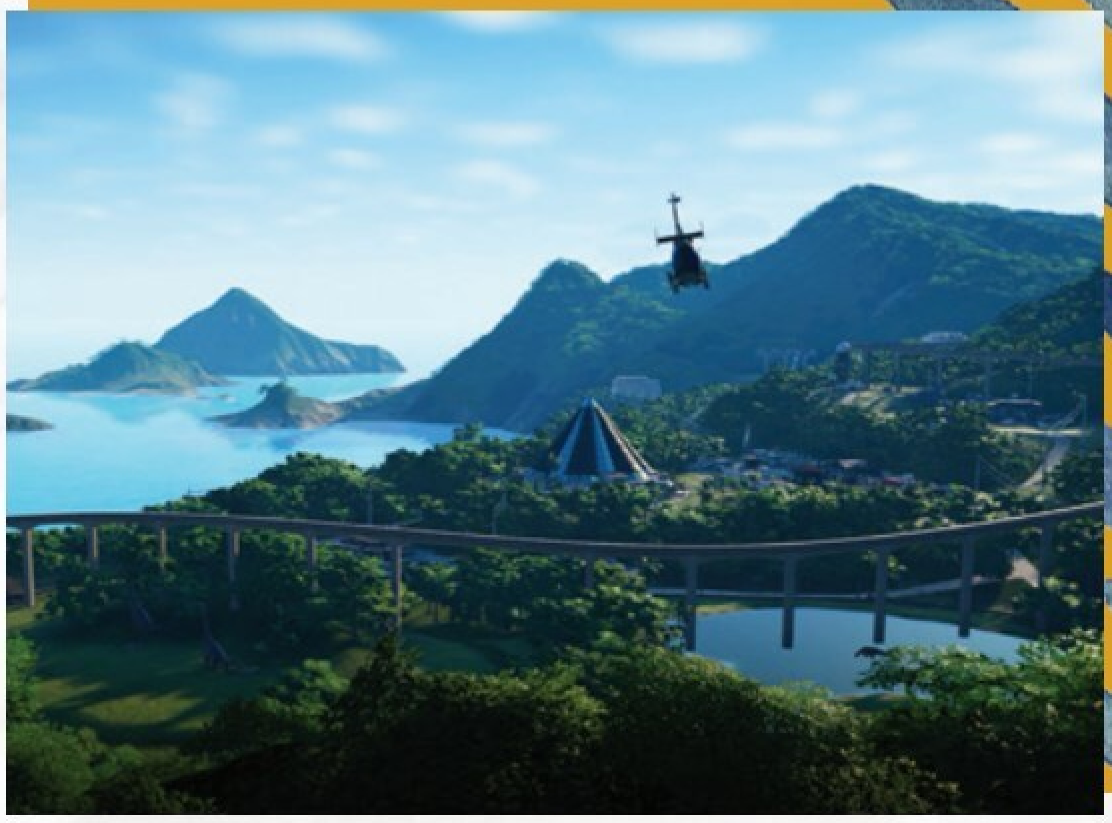
Controlling chaos with Frontier's new park simulation, Jurassic World Evolution

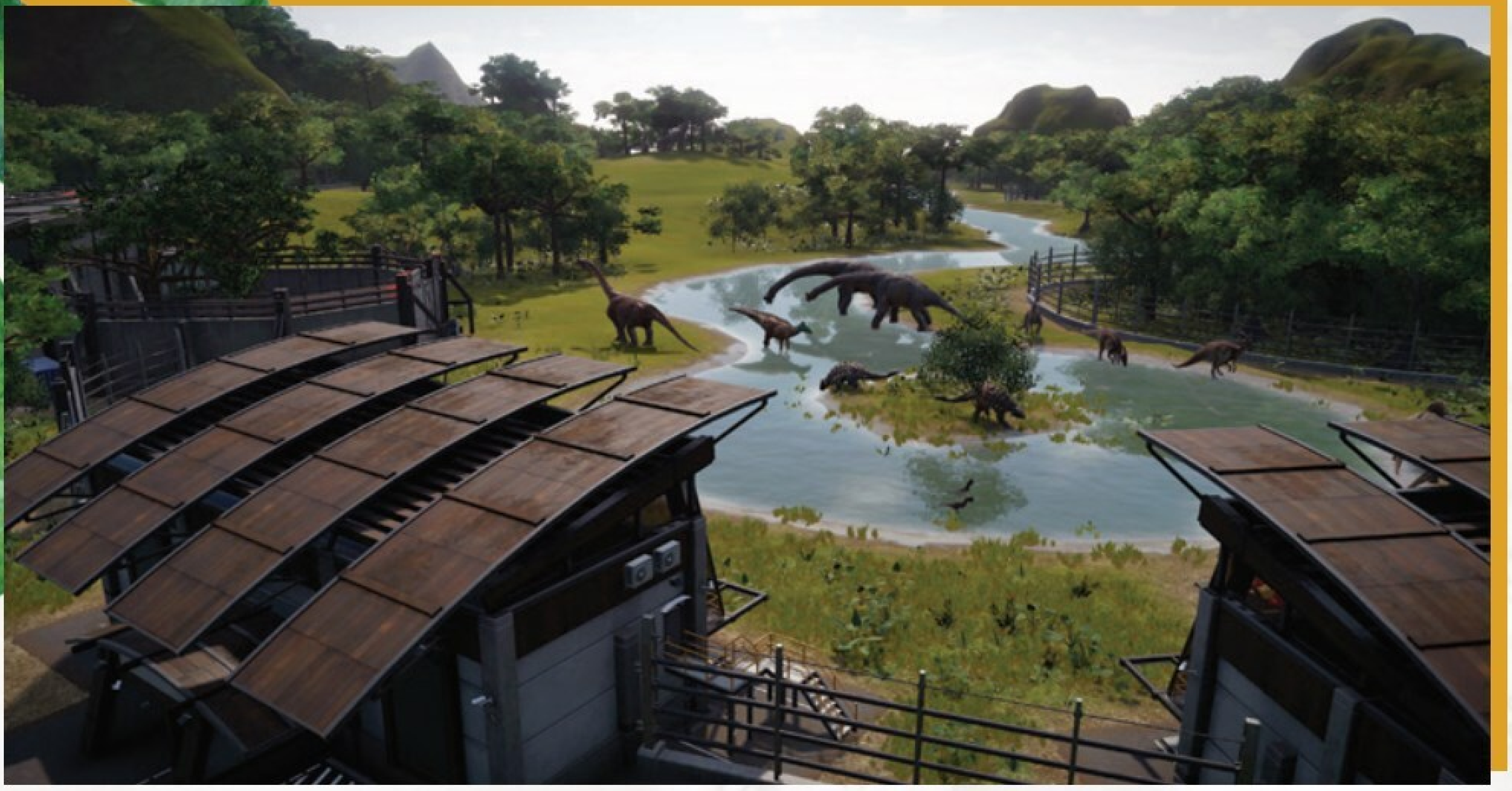
Frontier Developments is no stranger to the simulation genre. With titles ranging from Zoo Tycoon to Planet Coaster, the British developer is one of the biggest creators and advocates of the modern theme-park-management experience. With its latest title, Jurassic World Evolution, there are more serious considerations than the price of food at your concession stands and overnight amenities for your guests. There is the possibility that one of your attractions may bust out and start trampling or eating your merry parkgoers.

“There were definitely new things to consider with this license,” says game director Michael Brookes. “Traditionally, with management games you build them, and they get bigger and bigger. This game has that, too, but it also has what the films have. Things go wrong. Things have to go wrong, otherwise it’s not Jurassic World.”

In an hour of hands-on time with the title, I got the sense that this is a departure from the sandbox-style theme parks that are the hallmark of modern simulation fare. Instead, the player is tasked with working with a slew of sandbox components to achieve fully functioning tourist destinations in progressively more challenging environments, akin to a more linear, story-driven game experience. Surprisingly, the focus on a more structured experience didn’t feel like it restricted my ability to build and take things in whatever direction I wished.

BY DANIEL TACK





Progressing Your Parks

Jurassic World Evolution follows a familiar narrative – a big corporation wants to capitalize on the spectacle of bringing back the dangerous denizens of the past, and you're tasked with making that dream a reality. Consultant Dr. Ian Malcom (voiced by Jeff Goldblum) offers enjoyable banter critical of such a prospect as you expand your enterprise. You may ask yourself, why would Malcolm have anything to do with this park adventure after his nightmarish history with the Jurassic Park universe? We asked game writer John Zuur Platten for an explanation.

"Ian Malcom feels a responsibility because he's touched it. He's breathed it. He's lived it. He's survived it," Zuur Platten says. "He feels this sort of responsibility that if he can't stop it, he's going to stay close to it. He's going to be a part of it in some way and he's going to do what he can to sort of try and manage the genie that's left the bottle that's not going back."

"I'm playing the same character," says Goldblum. "It was a nice chance to sort of revisit the character. You'll see in the game I'm a reluctant helpmate and mentor. I was never for the idea of the park anyway, and it's still a bad idea. Using animals especially once-extinct animals misguidedly reanimated in order to sell tickets to some cheesy entertainment or heaven forbid for some militaristic leverage – but for the purposes of the game you might get a kick out of this! Ian Malcom has done this so he can sort of lay in some conscience Easter eggs. Go ahead and build that park … but watch out!"

Jurassic World Evolution features five different islands to develop and explore. You begin on Isla Matanceros, and as you become a more experienced entrepreneur, you unlock future islands that introduce additional research options, dinosaurs, and upgrades, but also feature different challenges, like environmental hazards that can cause serious problems for your tried-and-true setups. While not part of the five-island ensemble, Isla Nublar will also be involved in some way – and so will some classic Jurassic Park characters.

"We wanted it to have narrative elements, a progression structure," says lead designer Andrew Fletcher. "Sort of more substantial and more accommodating perhaps to a broad audience. But at the heart you can still play it as if it's a sandbox. Each island you can restart and try numerous times however you want."

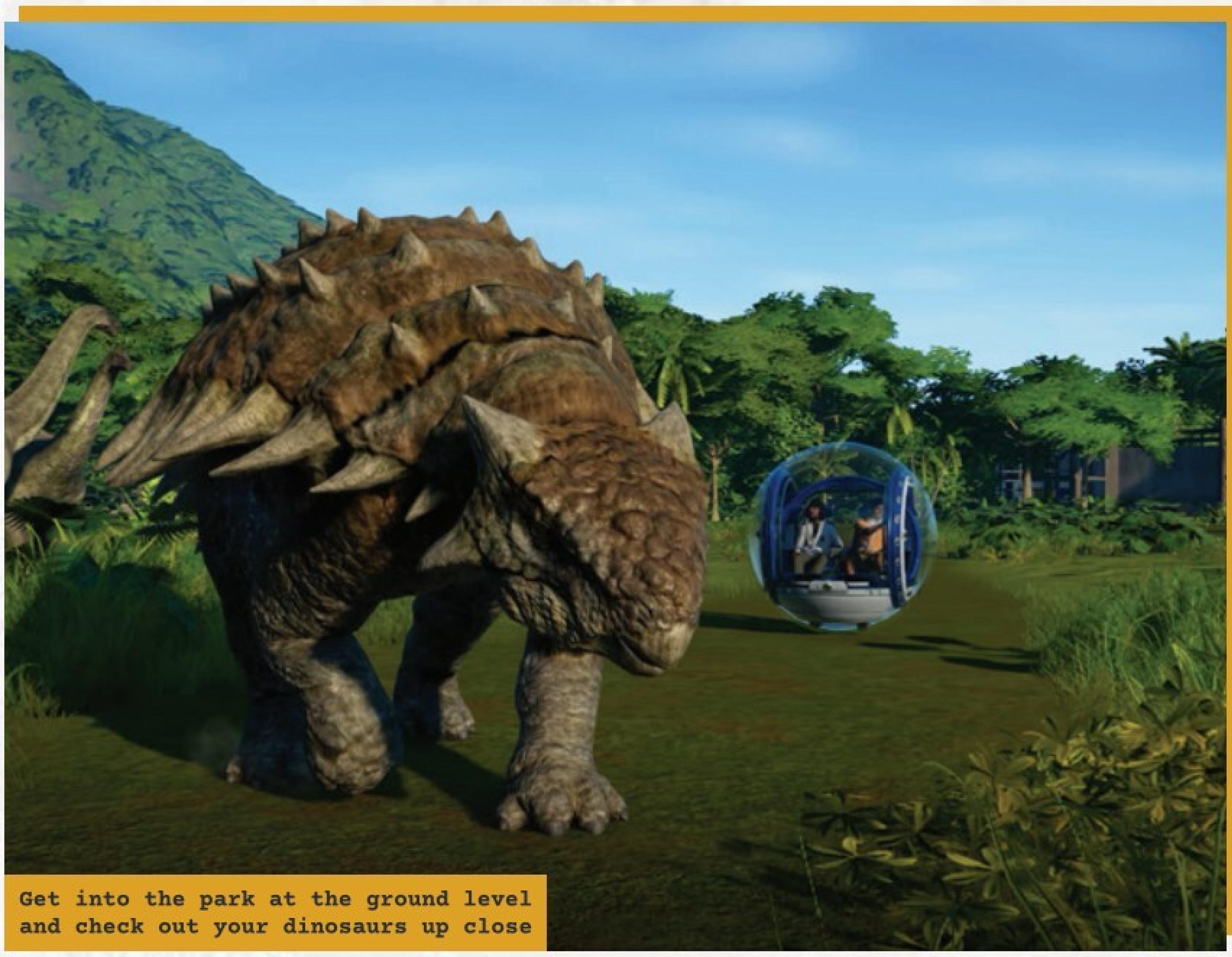
While we didn't get to see many of these bonus quirks during our one-hour hands-on session with the first island, the tropical storms we faced in this place were troublesome enough, so we expect the other islands to come with some feisty elements of their own. Frontier hinted that there will be other serious issues to tackle like tornadoes, mechanical breakdowns, and even the possibility of staff sabotage.

Once you unlock features on later islands, you are free to go back and implement them on your old ones, allowing you to renovate and improve with those benefits across your park empire.

One of the key elements to progression in Jurassic World Evolution is tied to the expedition mechanic. On a special map, you can send your expedition team all over the globe in search of fossils. These digs provide the valuable genome research you need to create new dinosaurs, and are an excellent source of money as well. Once you have enough data on any given dino, they can be designed and released

BINGO! DINO DNA

Your dinosaur exhibits are at the core of Jurassic World Evolution. As you acquire genomes via expeditions, you can create new dinosaurs once you reach 50 percent with any given dinosaur. As you become more proficient with a genome up to 100 percent, your dinosaurs receive enhanced traits. When your research and genome acquisition advances, you gain access to new DNA strands, allowing you to change the cosmetic appearance and lifespans of your core dinosaurs. You can improve their defensive capabilities as well, allowing them to survive scraps with other dinos. New genes make your dinosaurs more expensive, but the benefits should outweigh the costs (Visitors enjoy checking out better dinos). Certain genes can only be acquired by moving down reputation and mission paths for the three specialized divisions.



Get into the park at the ground level and check out your dinosaurs up close from your Hammond Creation Lab. You can sell extra fossils you don't need for money, as well as other dig finds like silver that are simply used for income. Expeditions take time to yield rewards, so you can focus on putting your park together while you wait for the chopper to return.

Touring And Terraforming The Grounds

One of the most interesting elements Jurassic World Evolution introduces is the ability to view the park from the tourist level in a third-person perspective. Far from the top-down view we're all used to in simulations, this lets you engage with your guests – and more importantly, dinosaurs – at the ground level. If you need to tranquilize a rampaging dinosaur or go in and manually change out the feeders, you can. To check out how things are playing out, you can hop in a rover and zoom around the park.

Other vehicles like the helicopter allow you to take a multitude of views and perspectives. Frontier even designed a minigame tied to vehicular pursuits, where you can take photos of your various dinosaurs. The better the photo, the more money you receive, so this is a good use of your time if you're waiting for a major purchase or some serious research to kick in.

You don't necessarily need to engage in these activities, as you can set your rovers to handle automated tasks like replenishing feeders and repairing fences, but it provides a nice break from the core management tasks.

While much of the entertainment comes from researching, creating, and interacting with your dinosaur creations, there's still a lot of theme-park management to handle as well. Grab your landscaping tools and carve out a lake, demolish some woods in the way, and terraform hills to your heart's content. Change the food options at your restaurant, build an elaborate hotel, and make sure your power lines and footpaths are perfectly coordinated. Crafting the perfect setup is challenging, and making sure everything's connected in just the right way is satisfying.

You're not just taking care of guests – your massive beasts require all kinds of attention as well, from friends to food. Dinosaurs have social needs, so they like having other dinosaurs around to interact with, but of course you must be careful about putting herbivores and predators together. Feeders provide everything from plants to goats for your creatures, and making extra effort around your pens goes a long way. Sightseeing stations for tourists bring in more visitors and raising the terrain around the pen might save your skin if something goes awry and the dinosaurs get some unexpected face time with your guests.

Some of the larger dinosaurs, like the T-Rex and Indominus Rex, can be a whole lot to handle

Forging Your Own Path

Early on in Jurassic World Evolution, you're given the opportunity to specialize your approach to park management by going down one of three division paths: science, entertainment, or security. Science provides more research and pure dinosaur genes, entertainment delivers more traditional theme-park-sim development, and security offers more "morally ambiguous" and experimental genetic options. I was not able to dive deep into these reputation systems, but I got the sense that they are optional incentives and not a strict guide to follow. You can change this later, so it's not a hard commitment, but your decision leads the way on your contract path.

Contracts and division reputations give you a "quest structure" that you can follow as you progress, but you can ignore them completely and just advance as you please. However, it's obviously to your benefit to raise your reputation with these divisions and claim bonus funds alongside division-specific rewards ranging from buildings to genomes if you want an easier time building up your islands.

On the flip side, it's also fun to mess around with freeform scenarios in your park. Building a ramp for your rover and going for maximum air time, putting a bunch of predator dinosaurs in with a herd of herbivores, or just knocking all the fences down to "see what happens" are all entertaining activities to mess around with that don't take you any closer to winning the game in the classical sense. You haven't had the true theme-park experience until you've sent a swarm of bulky triceratops and carnivores running right through a packed dining area. We don't know what happens in the narrative, but your ostensible win state is to get all five islands flourishing with powerful parks.

"I've been pleasantly surprised at how many people want dinosaurs to get out and chase guests," says Fletcher. "I was worried the dinosaurs would get out, and, you know, ruin people's parks and stuff, but they kinda love it."

Ticket To Ride

After building up an early game park and then intentionally destroying it during my demo by destroying my enclosure and letting the monsters run free, I'm eager to find out just what lurks in the later islands in terms of story, dinosaurs, weather, and potential disasters. I was told that the T-Rex and Indominus Rex are the two largest stompers available in the game, but after looking through the large (and mostly hidden) roster I'm certain we'll see a few surprises. I'd be shocked if the upcoming film *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* didn't have something special to bring into the mix. I'm curious to see how the full product will operate, being a more structured approach to Frontier's signature sandbox style. But after my time with the game I'm confident life will find a way. ◆

God Of War

Extended hands-on reveals that change is good

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony

» Developer
Sony Santa Monica

» Release
April 20

We've had the opportunity to play a slice of the upcoming God of War for our recent cover story, but there's something to be said for starting at the beginning. I recently visited Sony Santa Monica's studios and played God of War from its opening for nearly three hours, gaining a better appreciation for both the game's meaty action and, shockingly, its subtle and nuanced storytelling. It's definitely a departure from what came before, but it's shaping up to be a more than worthy member of the pantheon.

In true series fashion, we seamlessly transition from a tight shot of Kratos in a forest to gameplay. In this case, the character is positioned near a birch tree, which has been marked with a glowing handprint. Rather than immediately laying into the tree with his Leviathan Axe, Kratos pauses for a few moments, placing his own massive hand over the mark. It's an off-putting moment of tenderness, which ends after he goes back into his familiar rage-filled form and fells the tree.

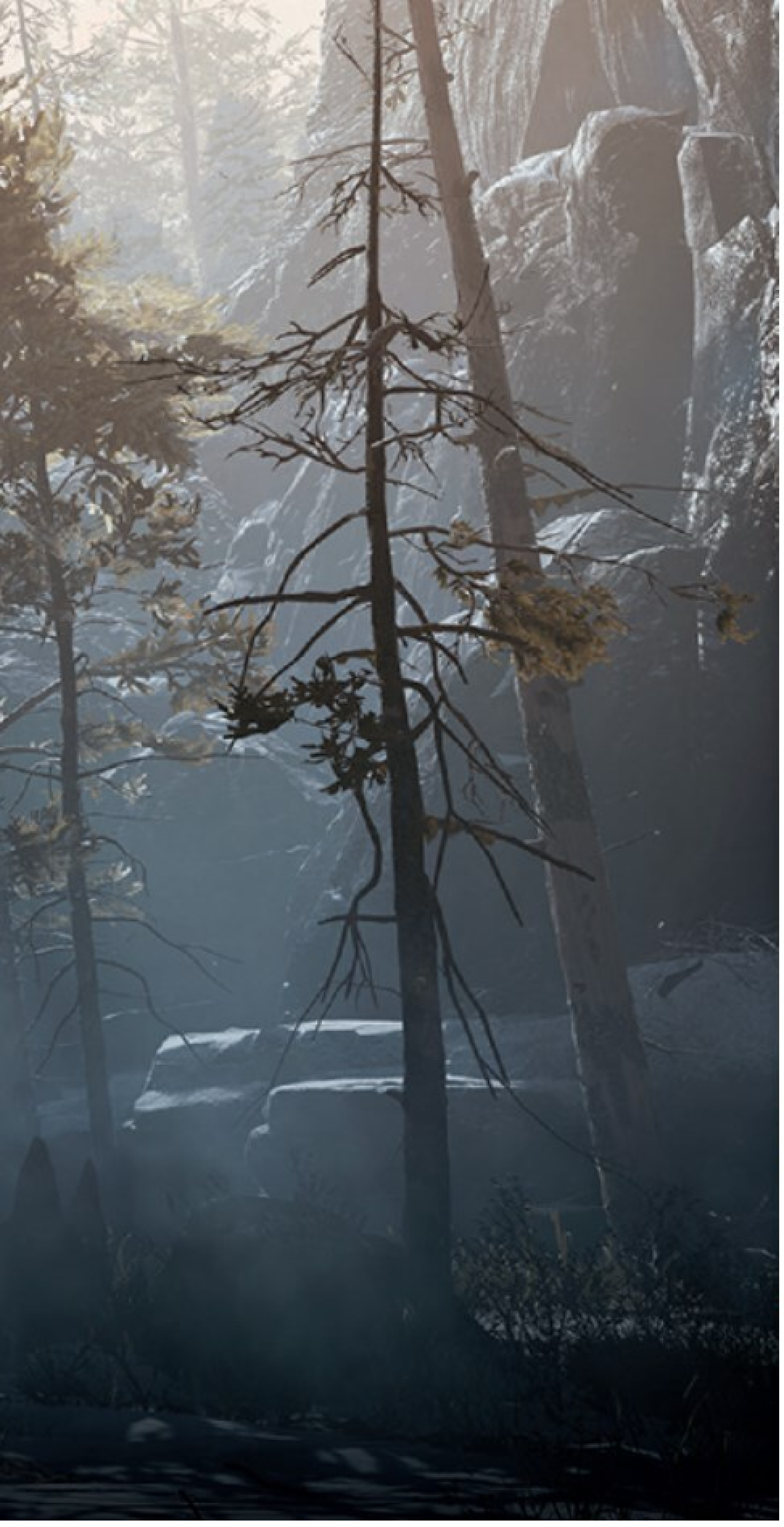
Sony remains evasive about Kratos' wife – and the game indulges that sense of mystery – but I'm able to figure out a few things from small bits of conversation between Kratos and his son, Atreus. She had personally selected and marked those trees for her own funeral pyre, which suggests she anticipated her own death and was able to plan for it. While I only see her shrouded body briefly, she's an incredibly important presence. She taught Atreus how to hunt, though perhaps not to Kratos' standards. The nature of those trees hints that she may not have been an ordinary human. She's also the prime motivator for the adventure. Kratos and Atreus are charged with delivering her ashes to the top of a nearby mountaintop. We've seen our share of a revenge-fueled Kratos; it's a refreshing change of pace to see him as a grieving husband and father.

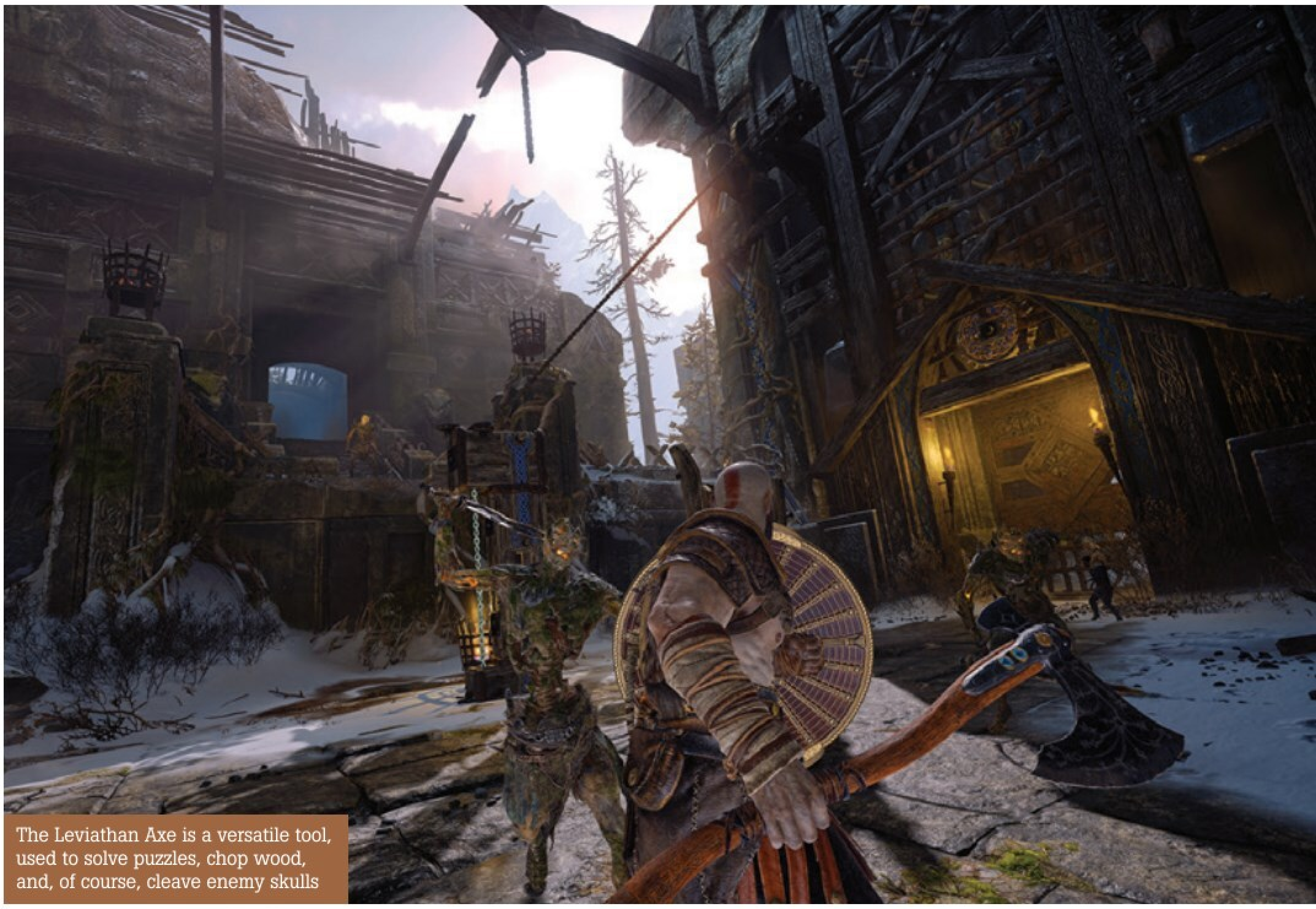
That's not to say Kratos has lost touch with his violent impulses. Undead Draughr have begun encroaching on the woods around Kratos' home, and Kratos and Atreus have to fight their way back home from a deer-hunting excursion. Kratos' signature Blades of Chaos are gone, his wrists covered in bloodied bandages. Fortunately, his axe can handle more than wood. I was skeptical about how well the game would make the transition from the series' traditional pulled-out perspective to a tighter, behind-the-back zoom on Kratos. Would combat feel as empowering? Would it even feel like God of War? It's definitely different, but the battles have a satisfying urgency and weight to them.

The axe is a powerful tool, whether you're cleaving skulls or throwing it at distant enemies like a tomahawk. Later in the game, I learn it was forged by a blacksmith named Brok, which helps explain its most interesting aspect. In Norse mythology, this blacksmith and his brother forged three gifts for the gods, including Thor's hammer, Mjolnir. The Leviathan Axe has a magical element, in that Kratos can summon it back into his hand at will. It doesn't just teleport, either. One of my favorite combat tricks is to chuck it at an enemy, position another between me and his incapacitated friend, and call it back. On its return flight, it not only does damage to the original victim, but also anything in the way.

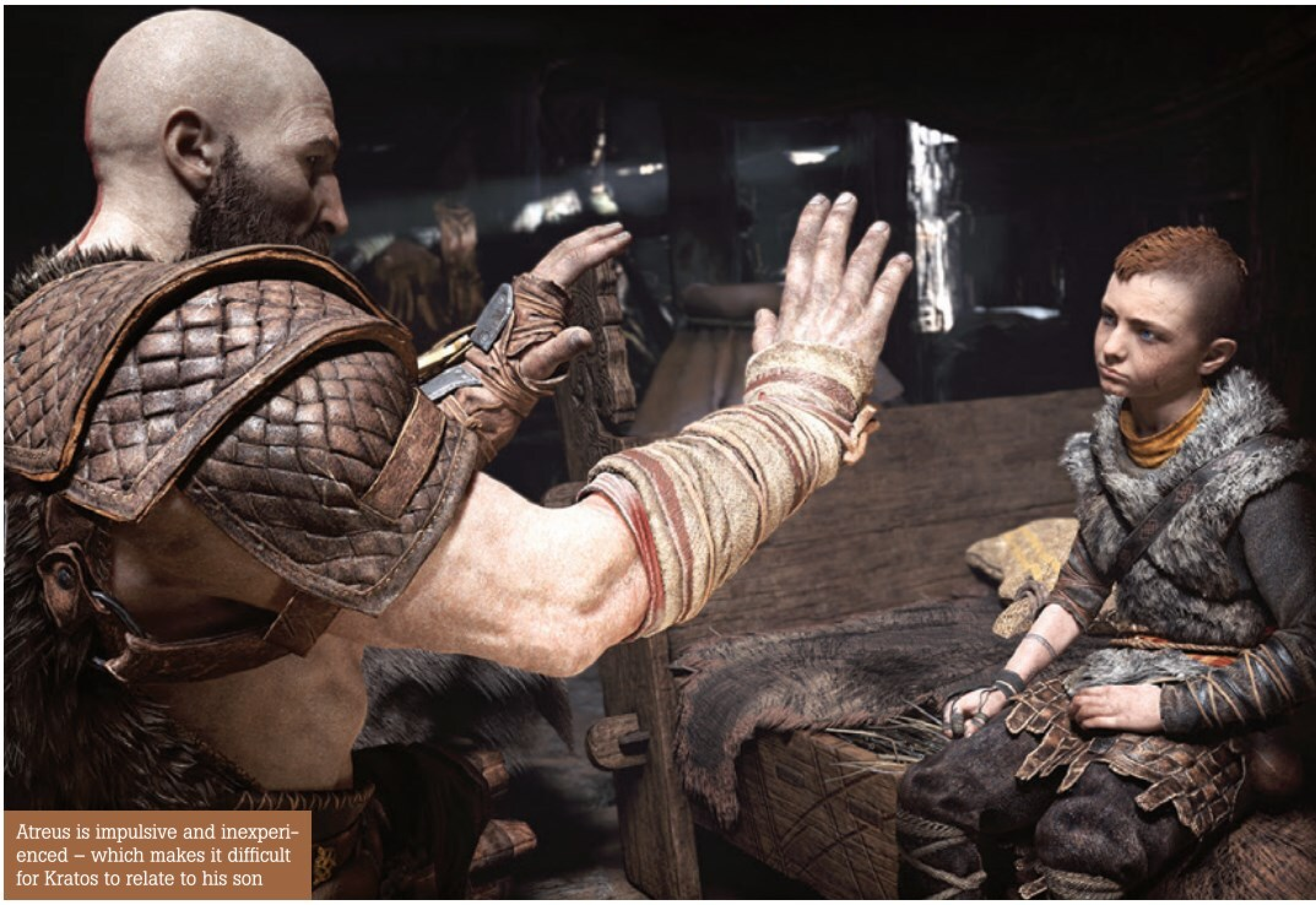
Of course, it isn't all about Kratos anymore, now that he's a dad. "When Cory [Barlog] was pitching this to the studio, it was very much this is a story about a father and a son," says Jeet Shroff, God of War's gameplay/engineering lead. "This relationship is the game. So we couldn't shy away from it. To deliver on that promise, we couldn't just let him be part of the narrative."

When people learned Kratos would have an A.I. companion along for the ride, many were skeptical. That's something the team was keenly aware of, too. "There's a lot of work that goes into making him feel like he's in combat, but also helping you and is never in your way," says lead system designer Vincent Napoli. "Early on, it was like, 'He can't be annoying ever.'" It looks like Sony Santa Monica has managed to pull that off. If you simply don't like kids, there's nothing I can do to change your mind there. But if you've grown wary of companions after





The Leviathan Axe is a versatile tool, used to solve puzzles, chop wood, and, of course, cleave enemy skulls



Atreus is impulsive and inexperienced – which makes it difficult for Kratos to relate to his son

playing too many games where your hero is basically an unpaid babysitter, you're in good hands. Atreus is helpful in battle without getting in the way. No matter how much I rolled around and repositioned myself in battle, he never got between me and an opponent. He remained just to the sides of battle, peppering enemies with arrows – either automatically or at my command. He also called out when enemies were closing in on me, in case I didn't notice the onscreen indicator.

Once you learn to appreciate Atreus' contributions, you can invest in his own skill tree and upgrades to make him even more effective. I gave him the ability to fire arrows that stunned enemies, increased the likelihood that he would intervene when Kratos was in trouble, and upgraded his bow to do more damage. There were moments when he was annoying, but because he's an impulsive, excitable child. There's love between Kratos and his son, but you have to squint to see it in the opening hours. Kratos has little patience for his son's nonsense, and he can be cruel and distant to Atreus. I'm confident this long journey will give the Ghost of Sparta an appreciation for the young fellow that is deeper than familial obligation.

Moving the action to the Scandinavian wilds invited speculation that Kratos would be tearing his way through the Norse pantheon of gods. There are hints that Kratos' presence is known in his adopted homeland. Some are subtle, such as spectral ravens that serve as Odin's spies (and a collectable, which you get by thwacking the birds with your axe). A mysterious stranger also beats on Kratos' door in the early hours of the game. I won't ruin the surprise, but their encounter ends with dozens of splintered trees and massive heaps of shattered stone. Even while Kratos is working on his new life, he clearly hasn't lost his gift for pissing off powerful individuals.

Sony Santa Monica could have played it safe with this one, delivering another God of War in the style we've all grown accustomed to. Instead, they've deconstructed what made those games so good – combat with a focus on crowd control, RPG-lite elements, and epic boss encounters – and reassembled the parts in something familiar, yet new. I got a sense of what they were going for the first time I came across a treasure chest. Rather than open it with a button-mashing sequence, Kratos simply slammed his fist through the lid. Kratos doesn't have time for that kind of nonsense anymore. He has work to do. » **Jeff Cork**

Artifact

Slinging cards across three fronts

» **Platform**
PC • iOS • Android

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Valve

» **Developer**
Valve

» **Release**
2018

Valve doesn't make games without a reason. Half-life is the company's proof it could make games, Portal was an experiment in giving players something other than bullets to shoot, and both Dota 2 and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive allowed them to tinker with in-game economies. With Artifact, its new card game designed in tandem with Magic: The Gathering creator Richard Garfield, Valve wants to accomplish two things: Move away from what it sees as the simplified approach that digital card games have recently taken, and explore a new way to monetize through their Steam marketplace.

When it comes to that first goal, Artifact already looks poised to succeed. As in Dota 2 (which Artifact uses as its inspiration), players manage their attention and cards across three separate lanes, though players act more as field commanders than heroes. Each of the five heroes at your disposal can only occupy one lane, making where you place them important. Where in each lane you put a hero also matters, since heroes (and creeps – the weaker soldiers that spawn in every lane each turn) can only attack enemies close by. If a hero or creep is clear of enemies, they attack the opposing tower in that lane instead. Destroy two opposing towers (or the ancient that spawns after a tower is destroyed) and you win the game.

While the setup makes it similar to Hearthstone, each turn is more akin to Gwent. Players take turns playing one card until both choose to pass, moving on to the next lane. This makes bluffing and baiting crucial, as you can trick your opponent into wasting valuable resources, or set up to have an advantage in the next lane if you time your plays correctly. Heroes come back two turns after they're defeated, and where you redeploy them can change the outcome of a fight.

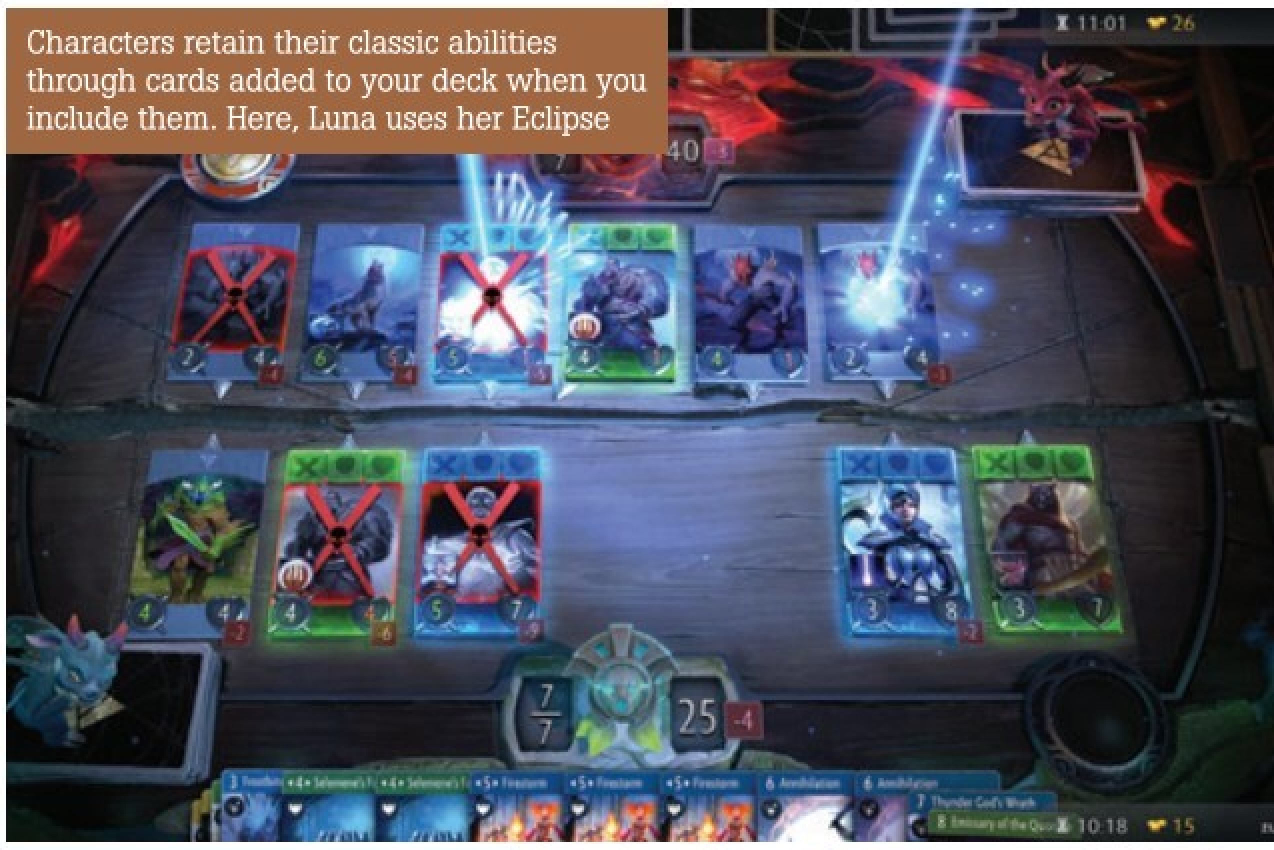
As in Magic, color affinity also plays a role. Every hero and most cards are either red, blue, green, or black. You can only use a card if you have enough mana (allotted to every lane each turn) and a hero of the same color in the lane you're playing it in. Each hero you choose also has a unique ability and adds three special cards to your deck, putting a major emphasis on hero diversity.

Items are included as well, and are bought between rounds with gold earned from defeating enemies and can be played without mana or affinity restrictions. This adds yet another strategic layer, as players must build a separate nine-card item deck and think about when to be frugal and when to spend big on cards that could shift the tide of a match.

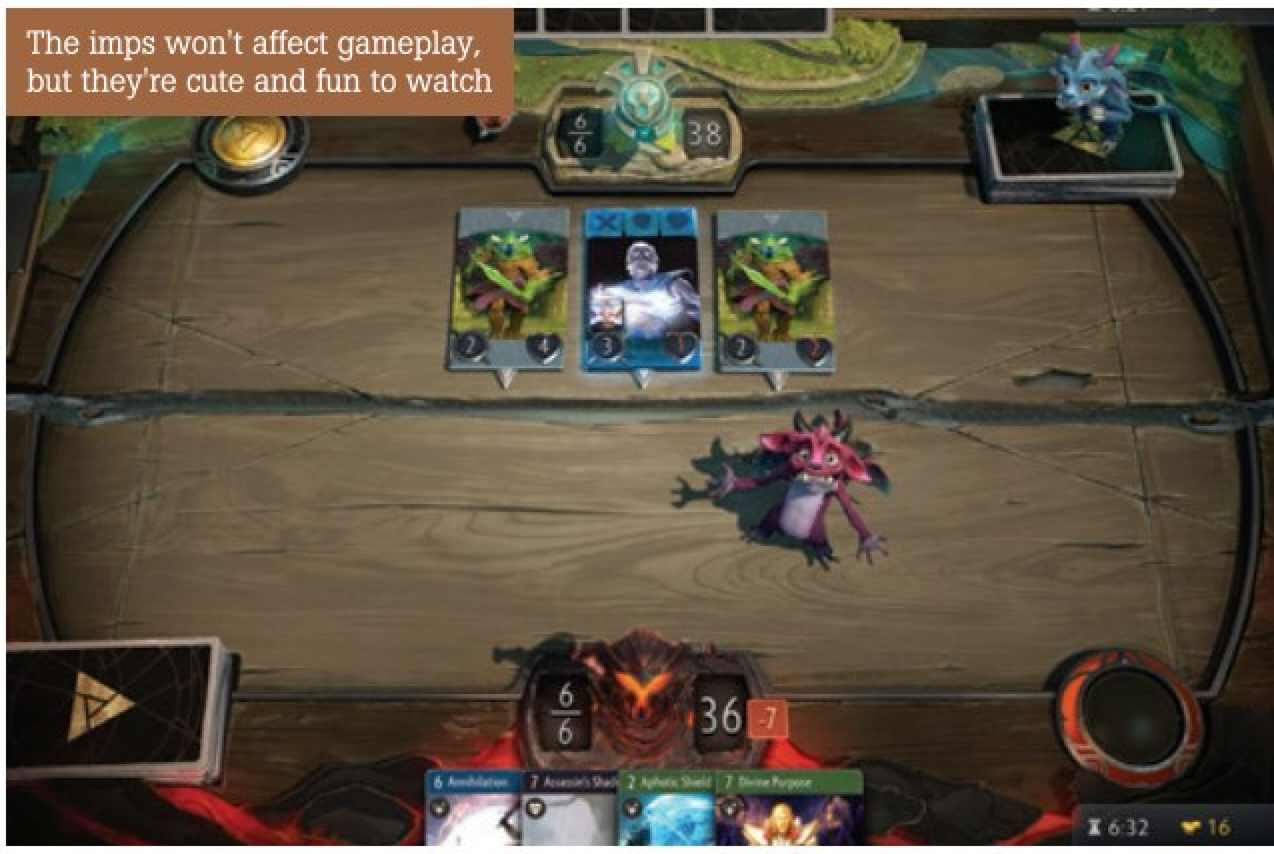
Unlike most digital card games, Artifact isn't free-to-play. Instead, it uses a more traditional trading card game approach, in which players purchase an initial starter pack then buy additional booster packs to improve their decks (the first set will include more than 280 cards and 44 heroes). However, they can also buy and sell cards on the Steam marketplace, so if you wind up with duplicate cards or need a specific tool to round out your deck, you can buy and sell as needed. Valve stated it will avoid a "pay-to-win" structure, but didn't delve into specifics.

The digital card game market gets more crowded every year. But even after only a couple of rounds, Artifact shows a lot of promise. Strategizing feels much more involved thanks to the three-lane setup, and while its card economy raises plenty of questions, it could reduce the grinding for currency and rarity-capping other games face. If Valve tweaks the numbers just right, it could have yet another successful experiment on its hands.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Characters retain their classic abilities through cards added to your deck when you include them. Here, Luna uses her Eclipse



The imps won't affect gameplay, but they're cute and fun to watch

Hunt: Showdown

Experiencing the thrill of the hunt

» Platform
PC

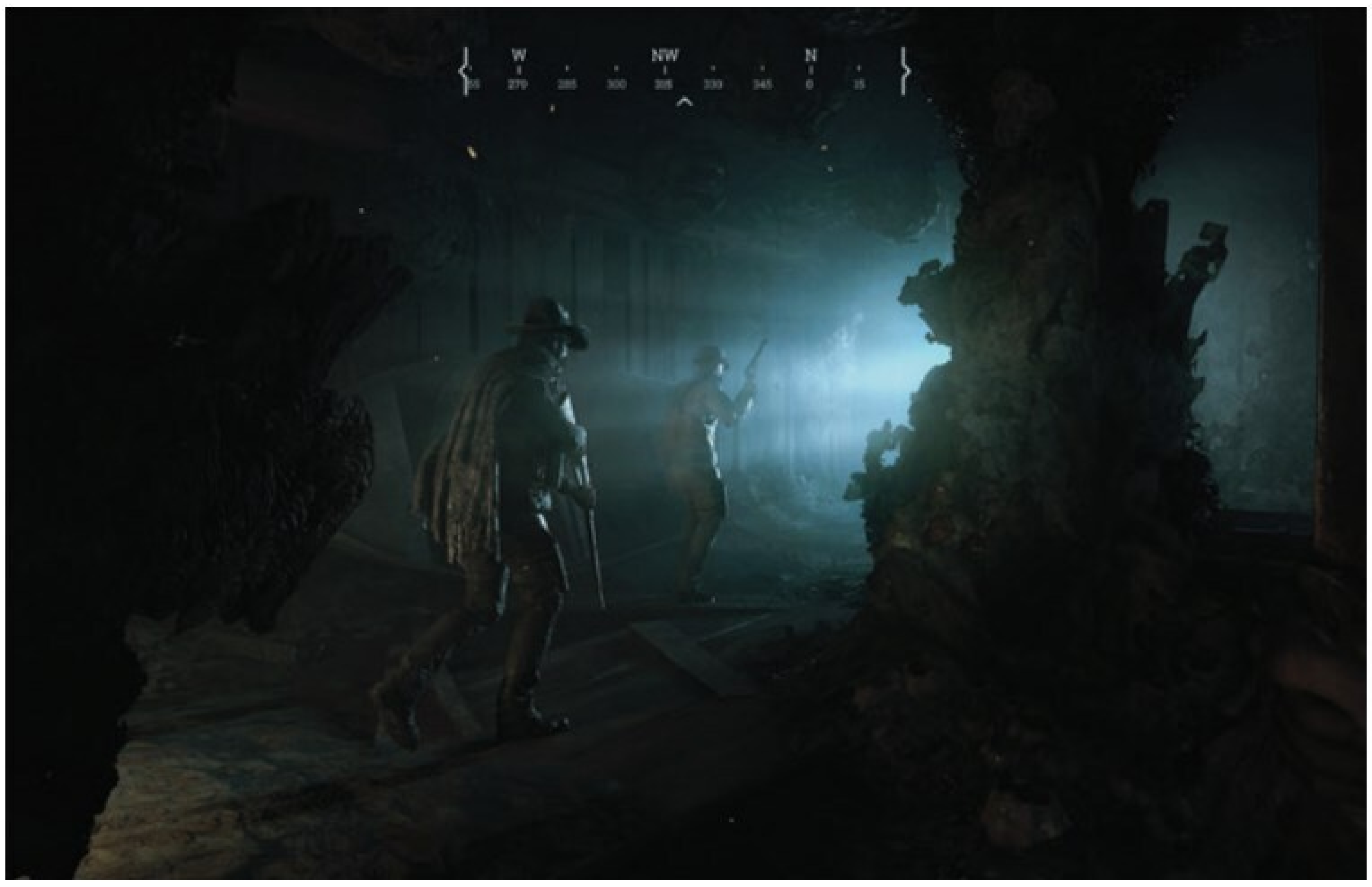
» Style
10-Player
Online Shooter

» Publisher
Crytek

» Developer
Crytek

» Release
February 22
(early access)

The past several years haven't been kind to Crytek. The creators of the well-received Crysis franchise and the original Far Cry have made more headlines for layoffs, leadership changes, and lawsuits than successful games. They hope that changes with the promising Hunt: Showdown, which just entered Steam early access.



This creepy, atmospheric shooter plays unlike any other game in the genre. Five teams of two journey into the Louisiana bayou to track a dangerous monster and compete for the bounty reward. As you search for clues that reveal the monster's location using a mysterious Dark Sight power, you must navigate treacherous locations filled with mutated insect hives, hellhounds, grunts, and towering headless humanoids you're better off avoiding altogether.

Sound is everything in Hunt: Showdown. Walking too closely to a murder of crows or a caged animal can cause them to take flight or start barking, respectively, clueing the monster hordes and other hunters to your location. Gunfire gives your position away as well, so I gravitated toward taking down grunts with charged melee attacks to avoid drawing more attention. You also need to be aware of proximity chat; if another team is within shouting distance, they can hear your duo's communications loud and clear.

Your best way of dispatching enemies is your firearm (you can pick from a mix of pistols, shotguns, and rifles), but given the late 19th century setting, don't expect dead-eye accuracy and quick reloads from your firearm. Aiming down your iron sights requires two button clicks, your ammo supplies are limited (though you can find more at designated locations on the map), and you need to reload each bullet by hand. This anachronistic approach to gunplay makes each encounter even more intense. If you get too excited and carelessly spray your bullets without hitting your opponent, chances are you won't survive the return salvo during the lengthy reload process.

Once a duo locates the monster and kills it, they must banish it to collect the bounty. This timed sequence gives other surviving duos an opportunity to cut them off at the pass and steal the bounty before they have a chance to reach an extraction zone. Much like the blue circle in PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, this mechanic centralizes the play and makes for a frantic finish – provided there are enough hunters left to vie for the prize. In my experience, more often than not I was able to escape with the bounty without any further altercations. Crytek may need to slightly expand the player pool to increase the chances of players having a pulse-pounding showdown.

All the ingredients are in place to make Hunt: Showdown a shooter worth checking out, but Crytek still needs to address some technical hiccups and rebalance the experience to make sure the game lives up to its potential. You can check it out now in Steam early access. » **Matt Bertz**

Sticking with your teammate is key to surviving the treacherous encounters

Trailblazers

A new way to swap paint

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Racing
(6-Player Online)

» Publisher
Rising Star Games

» Developer
Supergonk

» Release
Spring

In Trailblazers, racing lines are more than a best practice. Mixing Wipeout's high-octane, futuristic racing with Splatoon's penchant for overzealous graffiti, the racer turns speeding along the track into an arcadey puzzle, while also introducing a team-based approach.

As you hover across the track in your vehicle of choice (I chose among eight in the early build I played), you lay down a streak of paint beneath your path. When you race over paint you've laid down, you'll gain a boost. This boost is important to victory; the longer you stay on your own paint, the faster you go. At max speed, I was zipping by racers ahead of me. This makes laying down paint along lines you know you can traverse again important, and the more paint you lay down consecutively, the better.

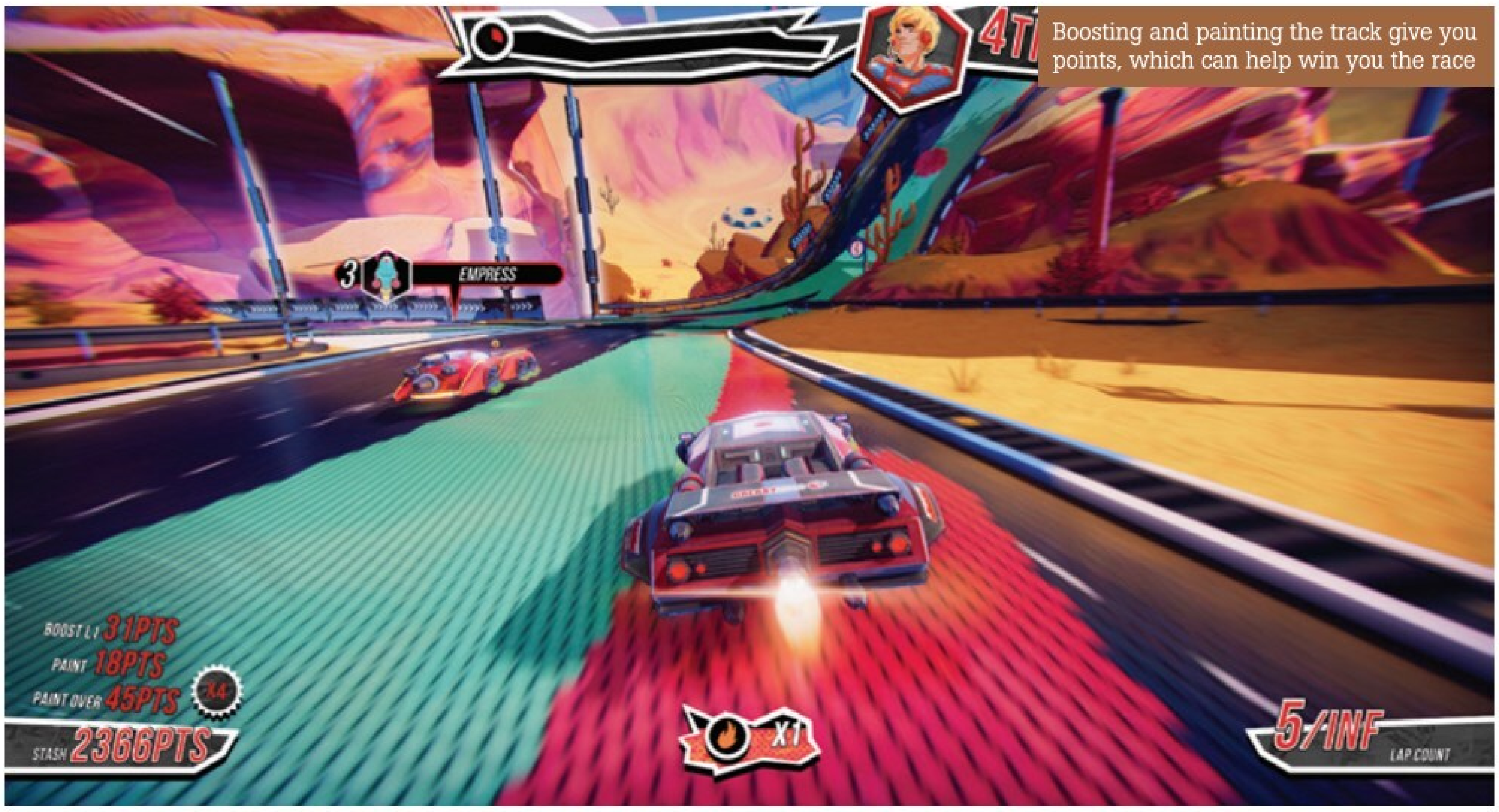
You have a limited amount of paint you can lay down at a time, but it refills quickly. Additionally, you can pass through gates littered around the track to paint a short slab of the track in front of you, making them an immediate way to gain distance on opponents. Other racers will mark their territory as well, and driving over an enemy's paint won't slow you down, but it will kill your boost. This makes it as important that you keep an eye on where you are driving as well as how quickly.

This also means you have to think ahead to subsequent laps. As I see a fork in one track, I ask myself: Is it better to go down the left path on the second lap, which has yet to be painted and could guarantee me a boost on lap three? Or do I continue to contest the right path, which would hinder my opponents' current lap but could end up slowing me down on next time around?

This strategy also plays into the team-based nature of some of the races I ran. These three-on-three skirmishes have teams fighting for points instead of pole position, and marking your territory means scoring well and giving your teammates an edge, so marking paths that won't be overtaken is key to success. One race type adds more gates but prevents you from plopping down paint entirely, making strategic play even more important.

Trailblazers' look also matches its fun gimmick, as the menus, racers, and graphics all have a heavily stylized look. A fun, upbeat soundtrack mixes electronic dance music with some light hip-hop. The menus, tracks, and characters are saturated and bright. Most of the story missions I played were fairly simple and strung together by a simple plot, but I'm hoping later courses and plotlines twist and build on earlier concepts.

Trailblazers introduces some fun concepts to the classic idea of racing around a track in the fastest time possible, and most of them seem to be working out. We're not sure whether the single-player or online multiplayer will come together, but this should still be a racer to keep on your radar come late spring. » **Suriel Vazquez**



Boosting and painting the track give you points, which can help win you the race

Ion Maiden

Back to the future

Back in the early days of first-person shooters, 3D Realms played an important role in helping the genre become more than just "Doom clones." Both Duke Nukem 3D and Shadow Warrior are renowned for their cyberpunk level designs, chaotic weaponry, comic book atmosphere, and the countless secrets stashed away in every level for players to discover. The playfulness of these games helped evolve the genre, giving rise to the idea that shooters could live beyond the phenomena that was Doom.

After a tumultuous period of restructuring (as well as the controversy around the long-gestating and critically panned Duke Nukem Forever), 3D Realms has returned to the form that put the developer's name on the map with a new shooter made in the same style of the company's heyday: Ion Maiden. This game follows the adventures of Shelly "Bombshell" Harrison, a gun-toting bomb disposal expert, as she takes on an evil mastermind named Jadus Heskel who has turned Harrison's former coworkers into an army of cyber-zombies.

"Bringing back classic build-engine shooters has been our aim for years, so we're diving right into a spiritual successor to the games which put 3D Realms on the map," says Frederik Schreiber, vice president of 3D Realms. "The team assembled for this project knows exactly how to execute our vision, and we couldn't be more excited to finally bring back a true 3D Realms shooter."

As someone who grew up on those shooters, Schreiber's statement rings true. Zany homing ball bombs you roll into enemies reduce them to red mush. Many secrets are littered throughout these massive levels as well, like a wink at Portal's companion cube and cake hiding away in an attic or Duke Nukem's outfit hanging in a clothing store. Ion Maiden exudes a particular sort of charming playfulness that's hard to resist; it's a game that loves to literally shower you in the entrails of your foes while rewarding you with pop culture secrets and ridiculously powerful weaponry. It's also hard as nails.

Ion Maiden focuses on speed and strafing, as most early shooters do, throwing waves of enemies down narrow hallways for you to either mow down or be mowed down by. I loved the exhilaration of bouncing off surfaces with jumps and destroying foes from the air with shotgun blasts and bombs.

I enjoyed my time with 3D Realms' return to form, and eagerly await the full version's release later this year. Switch players might also be in for a treat as well. Though Schreiber wouldn't say the game was officially planned for release on Nintendo's console, he did say 3D Realms had been testing the game on it and had been pleased with the results thus far. Here's hoping we get to eviscerate on the go as well. » **Javy Gwaltney**

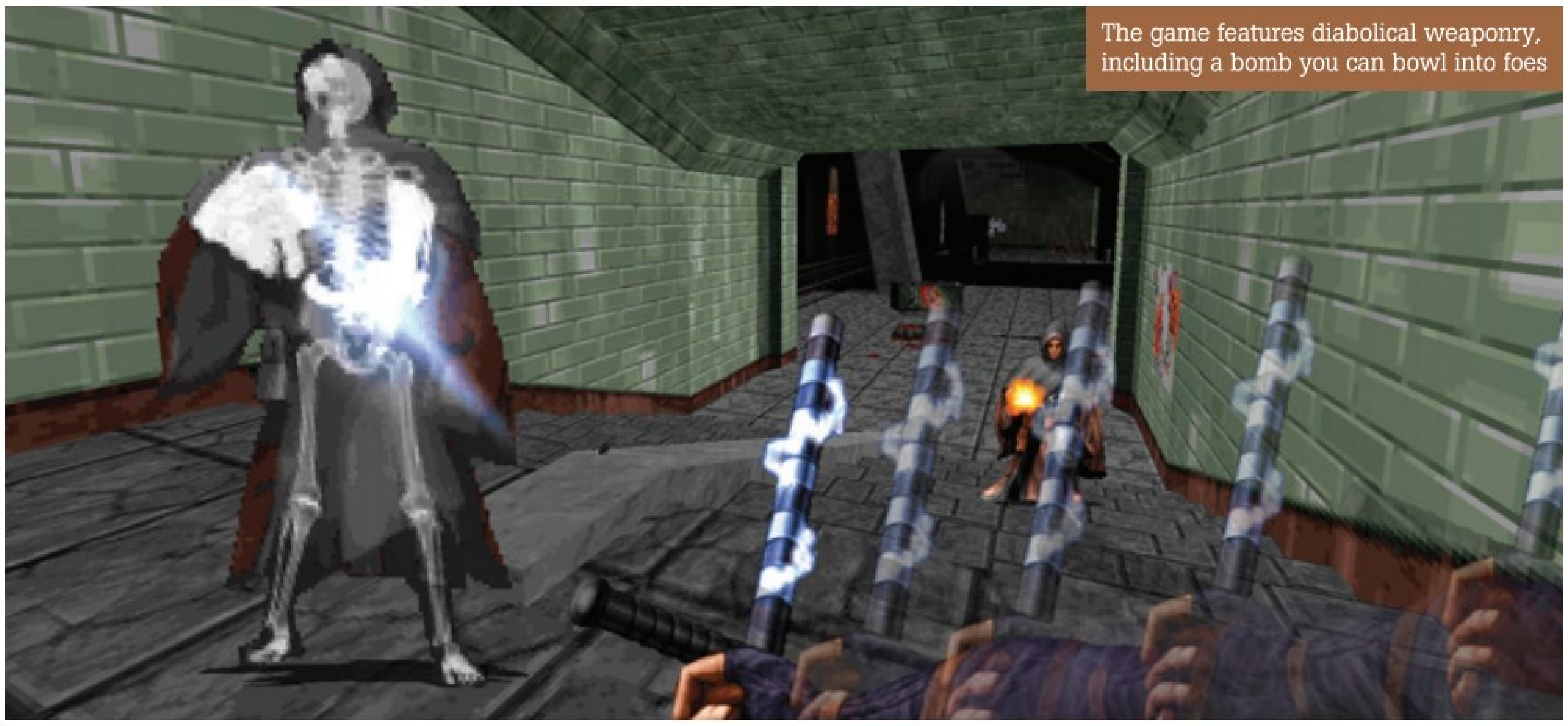
» **Platform**
PC

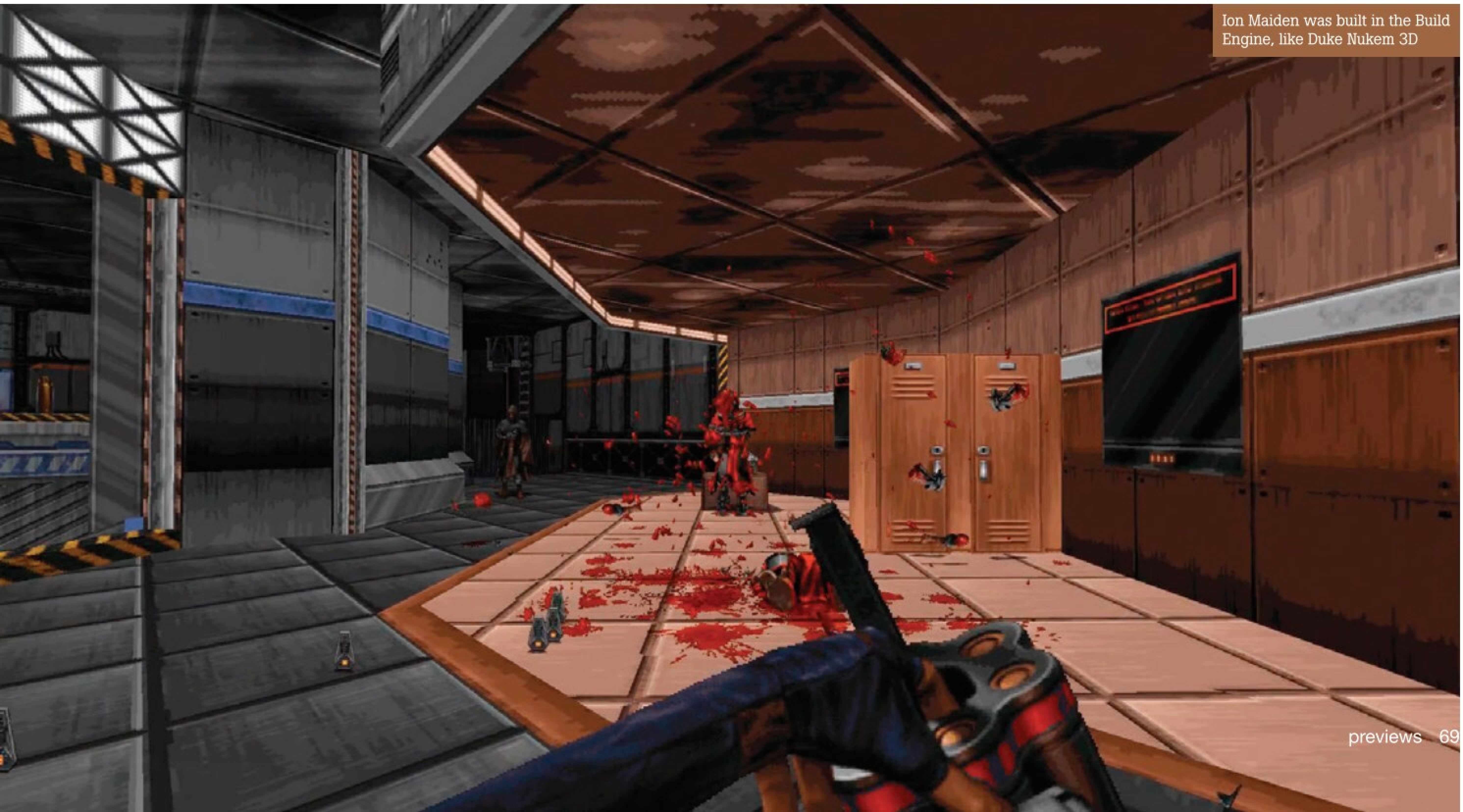
» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

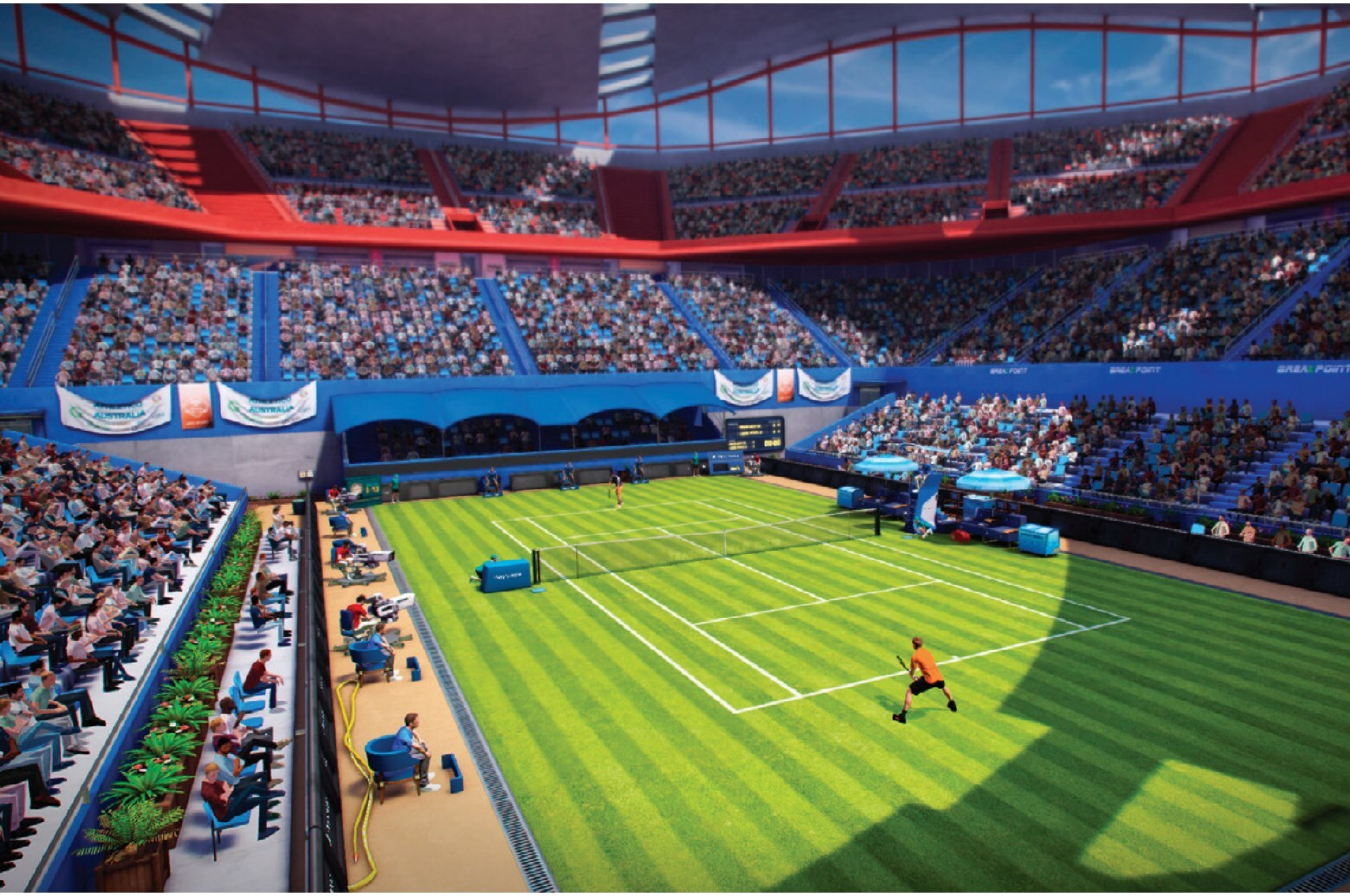
» **Publisher**
3D Realms

» **Developer**
Voidpoint

» **Release**
2018


The game features diabolical weaponry, including a bomb you can bowl into foes


Ion Maiden was built in the Build Engine, like Duke Nukem 3D



Tennis World Tour

A new challenger takes center court

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Maximum Games

» **Developer**
Breakpoint Studio

» **Release**
May 22

Most sports games these days prioritize their card-based fantasy modes like Ultimate Team – a lucrative strategy for companies that also entertains fans. The side effect, however, is developers often neglect traditional career modes, freezing out a portion of players who want more personal involvement with their character and who aren't interested in the card grind. Tennis World Tour's career mode intrigues not just because it fills a need, but because it's seemingly well-tailored to the sport itself.

In tennis, pro players pick their own schedule. They don't enter every tournament, and this is a fundamental part of the game's career mode. The ramifications are much wider than just where you're going to play. Planning out your season involves mitigating fatigue (including going on vacation and dealing with jet lag) so you don't pick up injuries, but also making sure you're playing enough so you don't drop in the rankings. Training and meeting with equipment sponsors from week to week is also important, as the game's 100 pieces of equipment offer gameplay bonuses and attribute points are poured into player archetype buckets that broadly define you as an attack, defense, or serve-and-volley player.

You've prepared for the tournament for weeks, and now it's time to take to the court and make it all pay off. Formulating an advantage beyond your training lies in choosing up to five upgradable skills at the beginning of the match that passively aid your performance or activate at a specific time. For instance, one skill may boost your attributes at the beginning of a point and then decrease with every shot taken. This could be useful for serve-and-volley players who want to kill the point off quickly and avoid getting into long baseline rallies.

Currently, it's difficult to tell if Tennis World Tour's gameplay lets you execute these kinds of strategies. When we got our hands-on time with an early build, developer Breakpoint (which worked on Top Spin 4) was still tweaking the game's movement assist. Getting this right is fundamental to allowing players the freedom to travel around the court and execute shots on the run, approach shots, quick volleys, and more. The viability of the entire net game could hinge on the fluidity and responsiveness of the movements and animations.

Overall, the basic strategy of exploiting your opponent's position is in place, although you can currently unrealistically return shots while in the no man's land area in front of the baseline.

Fans have been thirsting for a contemporary career-focused tennis title this generation. Tennis World Tour appears to have an appealing structure for its career mode, with a few pleasant surprises. But to what degree it can execute on its ground strokes will determine how long this rally lasts.
» **Matthew Kato**

Yakuza Kiwami 2

Kiryu meets his match in the remade sequel

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Sega

» Release
August 28

Weeks before the western release of Yakuza 6: The Song of Life, Sega revealed the Yakuza train wasn't slowing down anytime soon. The publisher announced that Yakuza Kiwami 2, a remade version of the PS2 game Yakuza 2, was coming our way. We spoke with Daisuke Sato, producer and head of Sega's Yakuza studio, about the remake – and got a chance to play a little bit ourselves.

The first Yakuza game was an impressive debut, but fans hold the sequel in particularly high regard. The scale of that game was a marked improvement, and featured a memorably fierce competitor in the form of Ryuji Goda, the Dragon of Kansai.

"Yakuza 1 was a story about Tokyo," Sato says. "It was a story about a large organization called the Tojo Clan based in Tokyo, the infighting within that clan, and about a man who rose up within that fight to become a legendary Yakuza figure – the Dragon of Dojima. But it was all focused in eastern Japan. What happens in Yakuza 2 is that we took the story a little bigger. It starts to paint the picture of not just the east Yakuza, but now there's the Yakuza based in Osaka. There's a similar large organization over there, and they also have a similar character who's also a dragon, who has risen up in a similar kind of way in the west. Now it's the story of these two dragons clashing and going head to head to see which is the dragon that can survive."

The Kiwami games have given Sato's team a reason to go back to their original games and reflect on what worked, and what needs to be revisited. These aren't just HD updates; Kiwami 2 has been rebuilt with the Dragon Engine that powered Yakuza 6. Looking back with fresh eyes gave Sato some extra respect for the work they did in creating Goda. "When we built it back in the day, we thought, 'Oh this is a good last boss character. He's okay, he's all right.' Going back and looking at it, we did a really good job with that, and maybe we didn't fully appreciate it at the time we were making it."

Other elements may not have endured quite as well since Yakuza 2's 2006 release. Sato notes some of the camera work in their old cinematics was "kind of weird," and they've been redone. The localization has undergone a particularly thorough pass, with the team working to ensure the translation is as faithful to the original Japanese script as possible. Localization producer Scott Strichart recommends playing the first Kiwami game first, to ensure you aren't missing out on the backstory. After all, it's a direct sequel.

"There's a lot of different stuff that originally was in Kiwami that they rebuilt in the Dragon Engine now as well," Strichart says. "All the stuff that got left out at the back end of Kamurocho is back in, the champion district and all that stuff. So Kamurocho is a little bigger than it was in 6, actually." The Osaka section of Sotenbori Yakuza 0 players might recognize is back, too, though it's not as large as it was in that game. "It's based off the original version of Yakuza 2," Strichart says.

I got a little hands-on time with the game. It was a small section set in Purgatory's underground combat arena. I took on a couple of chumps before facing Goro Majima, who is now running a construction company. The combat felt fast and fluid, and I was able to pull off my tried-and-true combos from Yakuza 6 – even wrapping up the battle with a Feel the Heat flourish, a flashy finisher that originally appeared later in the series.

The Clan Kiryu game makes a comeback, too, though now Kiryu is a foreman for Majima's business and it's his job to recruit new hires (a new three-chapter Majima campaign is designed to explain how Majima came into that line of work). Yakuza 6's version of the minigame had an offense-oriented focus, where players sent dozens of units down a lane to take on enemy armies. Kiwami 2's is more about defense, where you manage fewer, stronger hero characters and prevent them from destroying your equipment on the construction site. It looks a lot more strategic than Yakuza 6, which is a nice change of pace.

Kiwami 2 came to Japan last year, and I asked Sato if he was hoping for the series to eventually have simultaneous worldwide release dates. He was enthusiastic about the idea. "Going forward, we want to definitely shoot for that. It's definitely better for the West if we can shorten those times from Japanese to a Western release, so we would like to do what we can to work towards that goal."

In the meantime, we won't have to wait long. Yakuza Kiwami 2 is coming to the West on August 28. **» Jeff Cork**

Splatoon 2

Nintendo opens the floodgates to keep things fresh

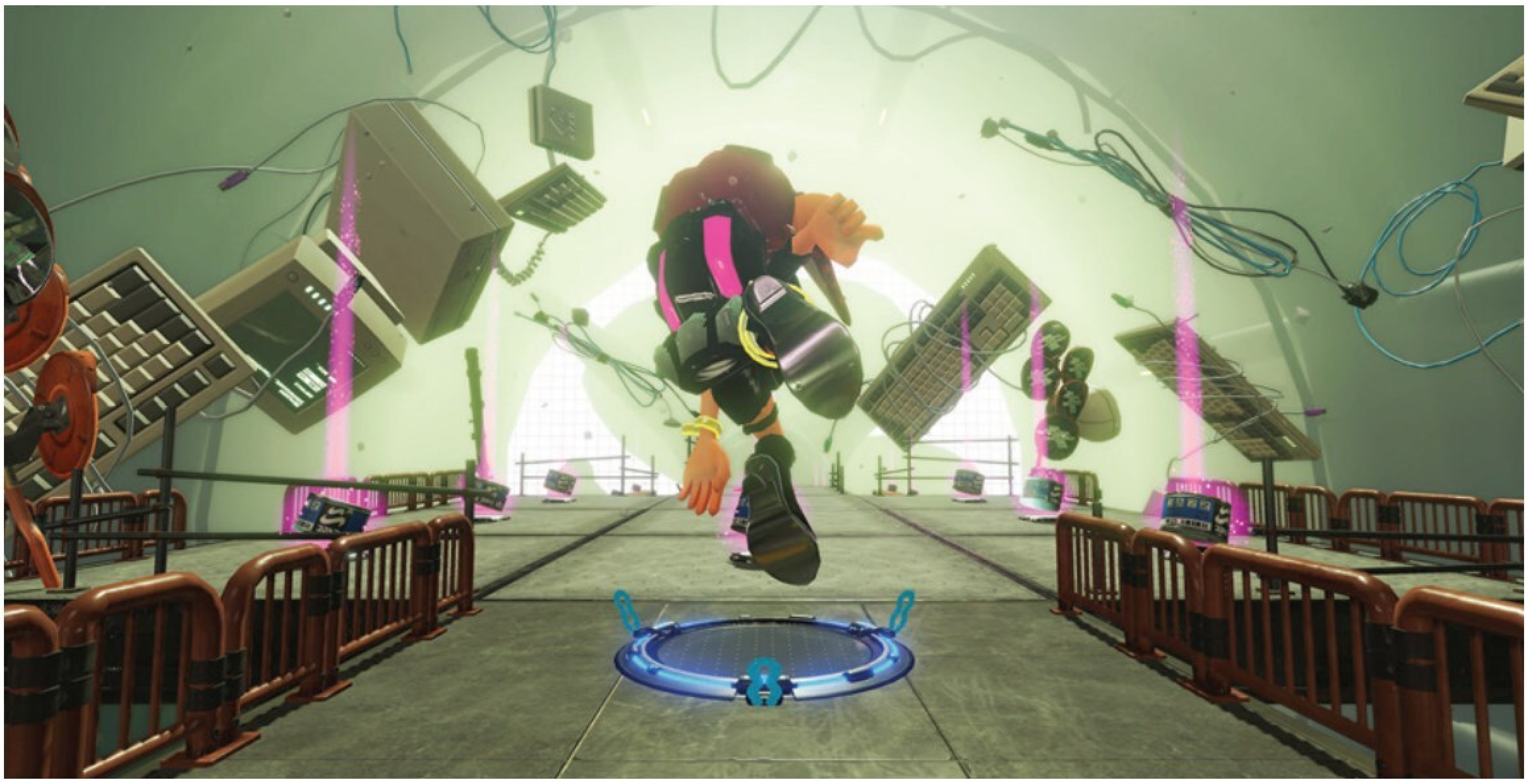
» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
Late April
(Version 3.0 Update),
Summer
(Octo Expansion)



The Splatoon series has garnered praise for continually evolving the experience through free multiplayer updates. Nintendo recently announced a beefy Version 3.0 update to further enhance Splatoon 2's competitive experience. In addition, the game is receiving its first paid expansion, the single-player Octo Expansion.

The free Version 3.0 multiplayer update introduces three new stages. Piranha Pit features plenty of paintable surfaces and some conveyor belts to toss some twists into the firefights. Camp Triggerfish features walls, ramps, and grates along its narrow pathways with a watery grave awaiting anyone who falls off. Wahoo World is a theme park and looks to capitalize on the skatepark aesthetic of Splatoon's original stages.

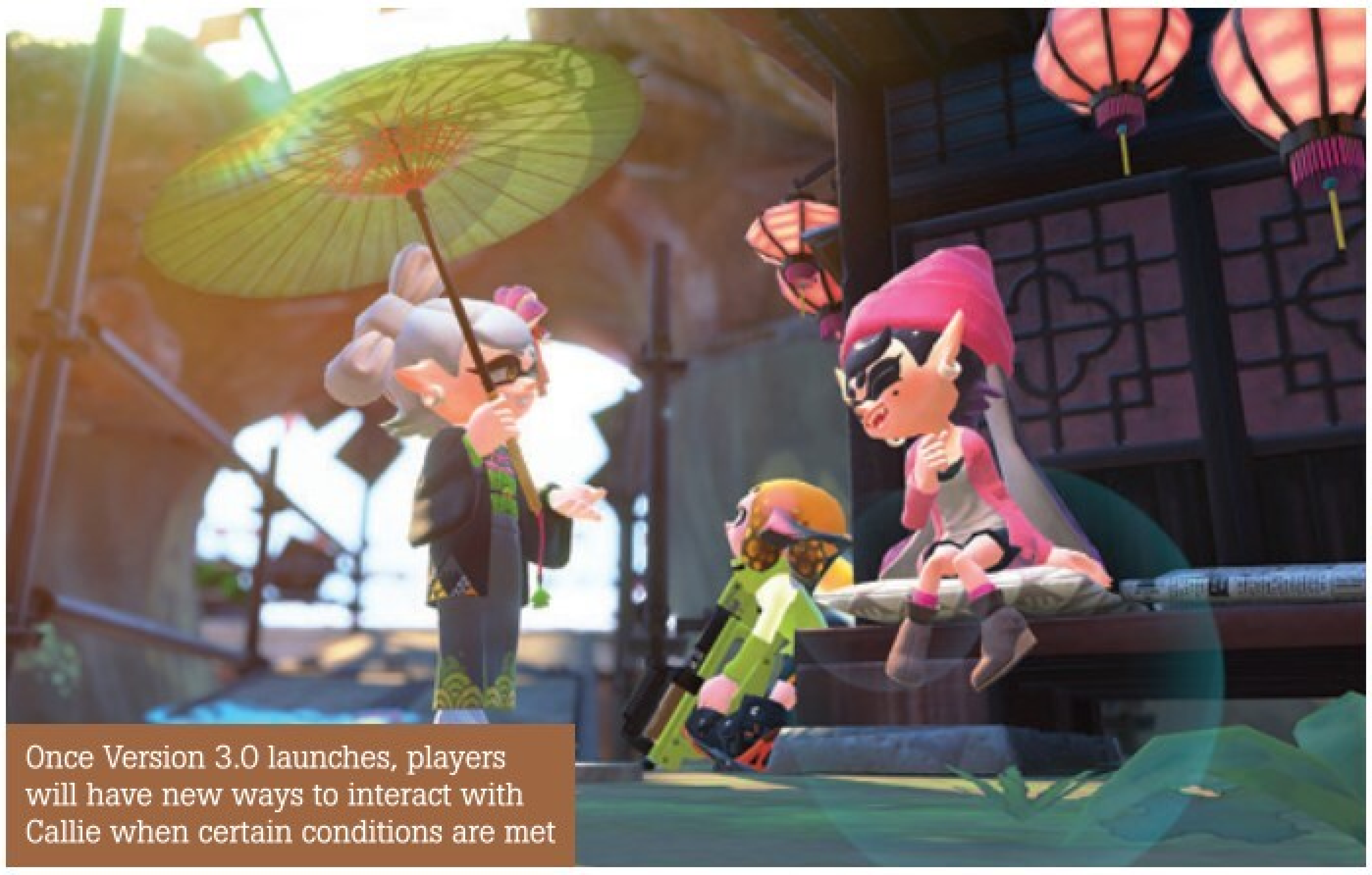
The most hardcore ranked players also get a new goal to strive for as a part of this free update: Rank X. Rank X unlocks when you go on enough of a hot streak to reach roughly the top one percent of competitive players, smashing through the current S+ ceiling. The update also injects more than 100 pieces of new gear for inkling customization, like colorful leather jackets, shoes, new gas masks, football helmets, and goggles.

The paid Octo Expansion promises to be a hefty new mode. This single-player campaign puts you in control of Agent 8, an octoling struggling to regain her memories. She awakens on the subway platform near what appears to be a shady underground test facility. Using the subway system, you can travel between 80 test facilities in a massive subterranean world.

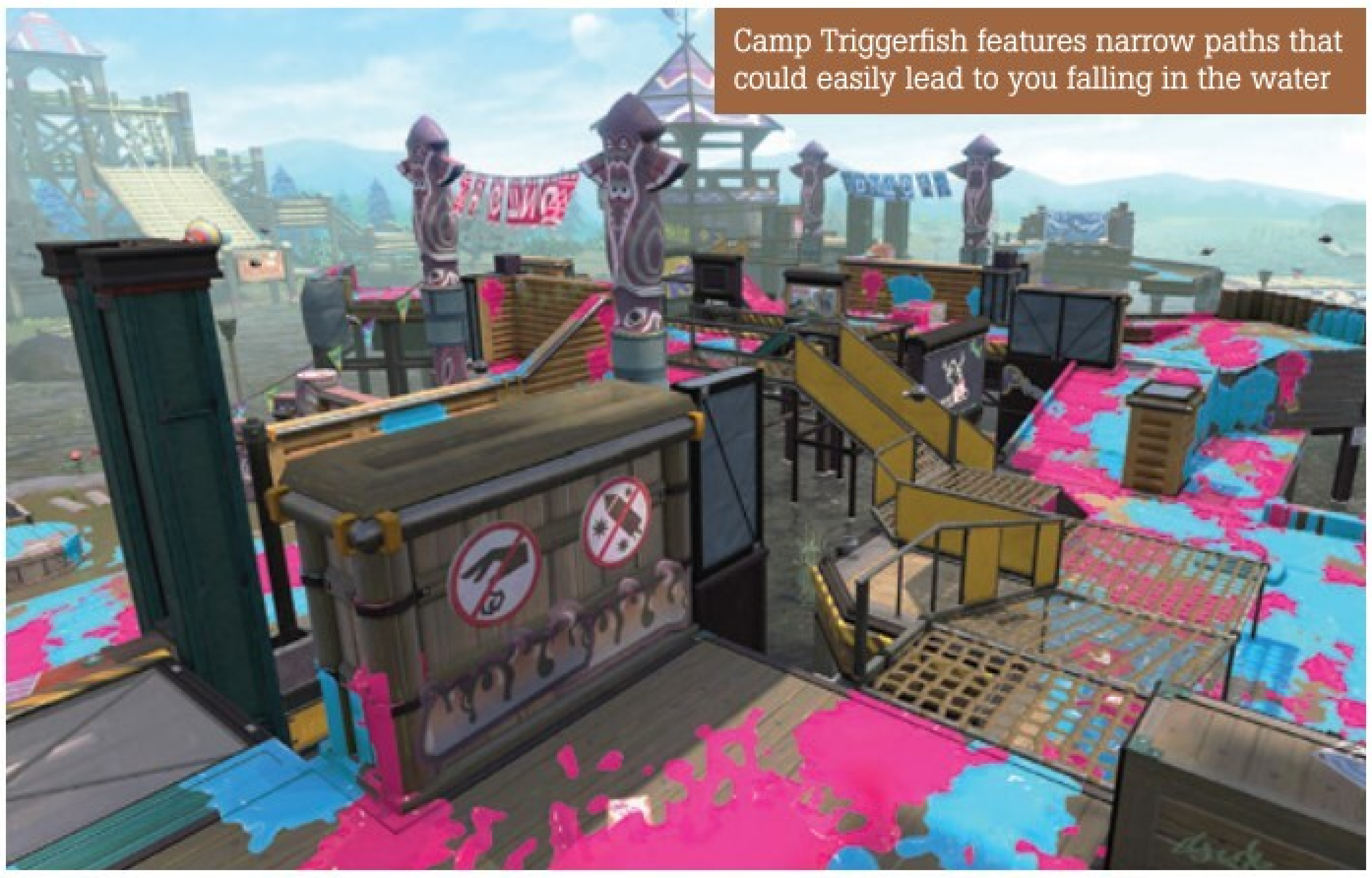
As you play through the expansion, you come across a variety of unique single-player missions. Favorite elements like shooting enemies, platforming on ledges, and grinding on rails return, while less familiar challenges like rolling around inside a ball like a hamster also pop up.

This DLC also further expands on the lore of Splatoon, something die-hard fans have requested. Characters like Cap'n Cuttlefish, Pearl, and Marina all play roles in the expansion. Once you complete the Octo Expansion content, you can choose to compete in multiplayer matches as an octoling.

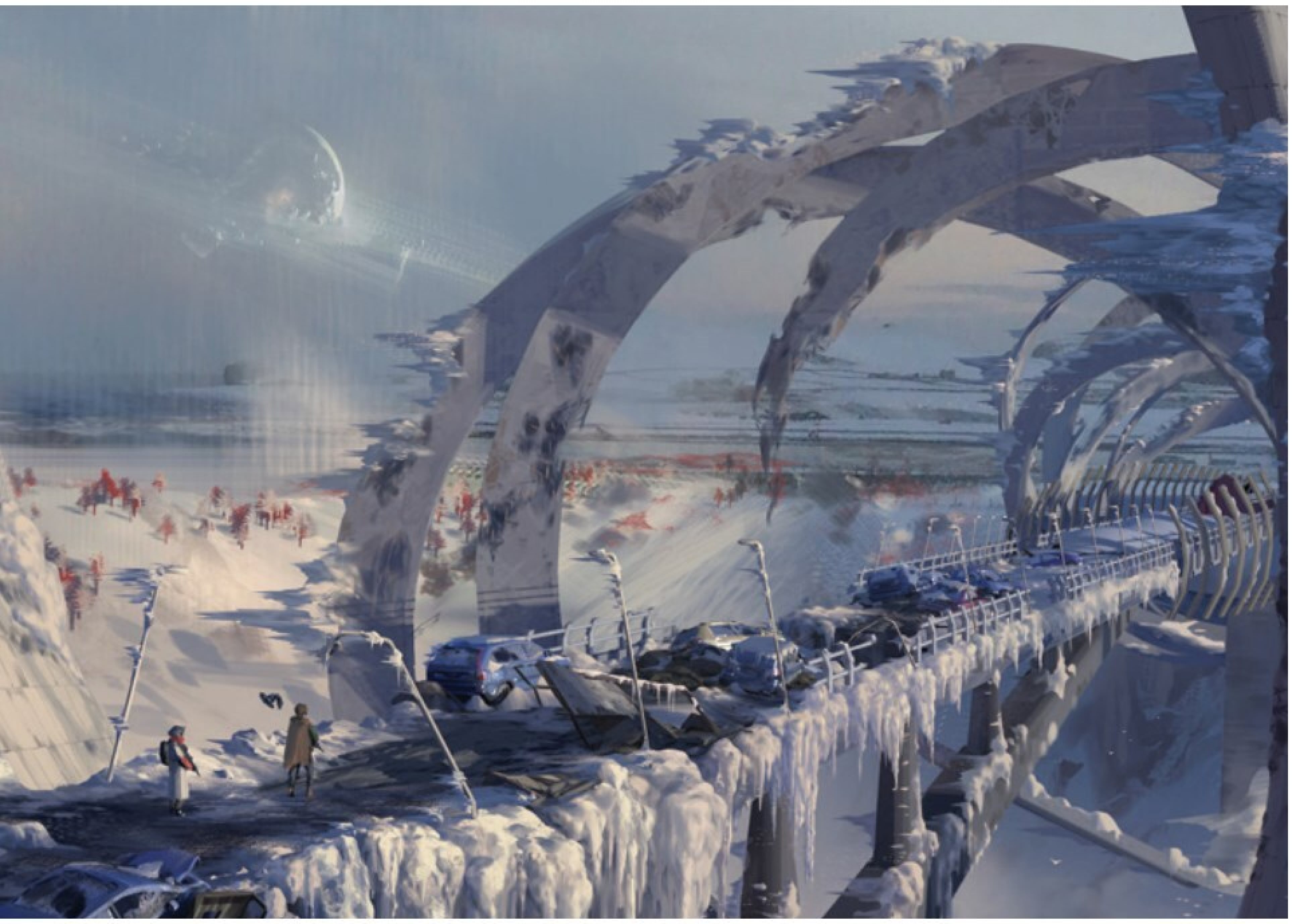
Whether you're still throwing down in multiplayer or you've been dying for new single-player content, Splatoon 2 has something for you in the coming months. Version 3.0 looks like a substantial and worthy addition to an already strong multiplayer suite, but I'm most excited that the Splatoon 2 expansion adds more to the often underappreciated single-player. The developers behind the Splatoon series have already shown they can craft unique, imaginative, and fun single-player campaigns, and I can't wait to experience the next evolution of that.
» **Brian Shea**



Once Version 3.0 launches, players will have new ways to interact with Callie when certain conditions are met



Camp Triggerfish features narrow paths that could easily lead to you falling in the water



Scavengers

Former Halo, Battlefield developers introduce a new survivalist shooter

Helmed by some of 343 Industries' former top brass and industry veterans, Scavengers is a third-person survivalist "co-opetition" shooter that hopes to fuse teamwork, action, and survival into one potent blend.

Years after an asteroid shatters the moon and transforms Earth into a frozen wasteland, you're cast as a teenager left to use your class-based strengths to make the most of the wasteland. Throughout each match, you must gather the resources necessary to survive, figure out the best route to your objective, secure your loot, find an extraction zone, and defend it as you prepare to make it out alive.

Scavengers is a multiplayer title, but your interactions with other players are more complicated than shoot-on-sight. One team's objective might be to clear out a camp of enemies in search of a bounty, while another might only need to collect resources. Two teams could then work together to accomplish both goals and make everyone a winner. Some objectives, however, might only allow one team to complete them, forcing those teams to fight to the death.

While developer Midwinter Entertainment is sticking to a single-map approach, they hope to make it a lively ecosystem, rich enough for matches to play out in dynamic ways. Along with real humans and A.I.-controlled wildlife, three enemy factions roam the frosty fields: the diseased and horrific animals taken over by a disease called The Scourge, the roughneck survivors known as the Outlanders, and a hyper-advanced A.I. race known as the Salient.

Along with Unreal 4, Midwinter is also relying on publisher Improbable's cloud-based computing engine, SpatialOS, to allow multiple servers to run a single multiplayer session. In theory, SpatialOS lets Midwinter up the number of concurrent teams on the map at any given time, as well as throw smarter A.I. at the player, leading to enemies who react more quickly and employ more infor-med decisions based on their environment.

Scavengers is early in development and nowhere close to release. Plenty of important aspects, like whether players will have to hunt for food and water, are still up in the air. However, Midwinter's goal to make a more brutal kind of shooter where players interact with friends and foes in new ways is crystal clear. Hopefully that vision manifests into something special come release. » **Suriel Vazquez**

» Platform
PC

» Style
Online Shooter

» Publisher
Improbable

» Developer
Midwinter Entertainment

» Release
TBA

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Shenmue III

The real fight starts here

» Platform
PS4 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Deep Silver

» Developer
Ys Net, Neilo

» Release
Winter

For years, Shenmue III existed only as an impossible dream for its dedicated fanbase. It was an incomplete story that would never see its end, but in 2015, on Sony's E3 press conference stage, Shenmue creator Yu Suzuki unveiled a Kickstarter to crowdfund the sequel's development. Since the game met its Kickstarter goal (which it did in record time), Suzuki and his team have been mostly quiet, periodically releasing screenshots and others small updates to its backers. Right before the new year, Suzuki and animation producer Hiroaki Takeuchi posted a video candidly discussing the state of development and how the game is changing in ways fans might not expect.

Suzuki's team is now two years into development and he feels confident in the team he has pulled together. "The real fight starts here," Suzuki said to Takeuchi in their video. The game is being developed in Unreal Engine 4, which has pros and cons. On the positive side, Suzuki says the engine has allowed the visuals to move beyond his initial goals for the game. "There are, of course, things that would not compare to a triple-A title, but they are better than what I originally planned," Suzuki says. On the other hand, Suzuki does feel somewhat hampered by the tools. "As someone who used to write everything from code, I want to see and touch what's inside, but I can't," he says.

The other topic Suzuki and Takeuchi discussed was the game's combat. Suzuki is one of the co-creators of the Virtua Fighter series, and the earliest versions of Shenmue, at least conceptually, took that style of fighting and incorporated it into a story-driven action game. That idea shifted and changed during the course of Shenmue I and II's development, but the combat in those games is undeniably tied to Virtua Fighter's style of timing and combos. "When it comes to fighting, there are things I want to make my own, so I was thinking to do things a bit different from last time," Suzuki says. He describes the combat for Shenmue III as "incorporating puzzle-type elements." Picking up an item, for example, could change how combat plays out. Combat will also blend more seamlessly with cutscenes and rely less on player skill in the interest of making it more accessible to a wider audience.

Suzuki also briefly mentioned the incorporation of quick-time events (QTEs). Shenmue was one of the earliest examples of what we think of today as QTEs. They will be present in Shenmue III, but Suzuki expressed interest in doing something new with them, just like he is doing with combat.

Suzuki finished the update by saying that casting for actors had recently completed and performance capture would start in the beginning of the year. He sees 2018 as the year life will be injected into Shenmue III and said seeing the daily lives of the game's many NPCs is still vital to the Shenmue experience.

Shenmue III has already seen one delay since its announcement, but the release is still slated for the end of 2018. The Shenmue series has always been ambitious, and Suzuki still seems to have lofty aspirations for this third entry. Hopefully we will get a chance to see where the story goes next at the end of the year. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Suzuki wants the combat to be more like a puzzle game than a fighting game, as it was in Shenmue I and II

Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes

Playing several games of life and death

While Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes looks to be true to the series' irreverent pulp stylings, it's making a few departures, speeding up and simplifying combat while introducing elements from wildly different genres.

Inside the mysterious Death Drive Mark II console Travis and his nemesis Badman are sucked into at the start of the game, players will find seven fake video games that introduce different gameplay styles. "100 Killer Marathon" is pitched as an action game, while "Golden Dragon GP" and "Life is Destroy" are racing and puzzle games, respectively. While most of the gameplay we saw focused on action-based combat, we caught a glimpse of a mode reminiscent of old-school text adventures, which promises to tell its own story.

The hack-and-slash action looks simplified compared to previous No More Heroes games, with no indication of there being high or low attacks. The camera is pulled further out, too, and depending on the level, takes either a behind-the-back or overhead view of the action. As in previous games, Travis has a number of special moves, such as wrestling-style grapples, a blast of sprites that can clear crowds, and an attack that summons a tiger. Players can also team up in co-op, in which one player controls Travis and another controls Badman.

We're still not sure how all these different gameplay styles will come together, but what we've seen of Travis Strikes Again shows a welcome return of the penchant for outlandish visuals and punk influences that have come to define the demented mind of series creator Suda51. » **Suriel Vazquez**

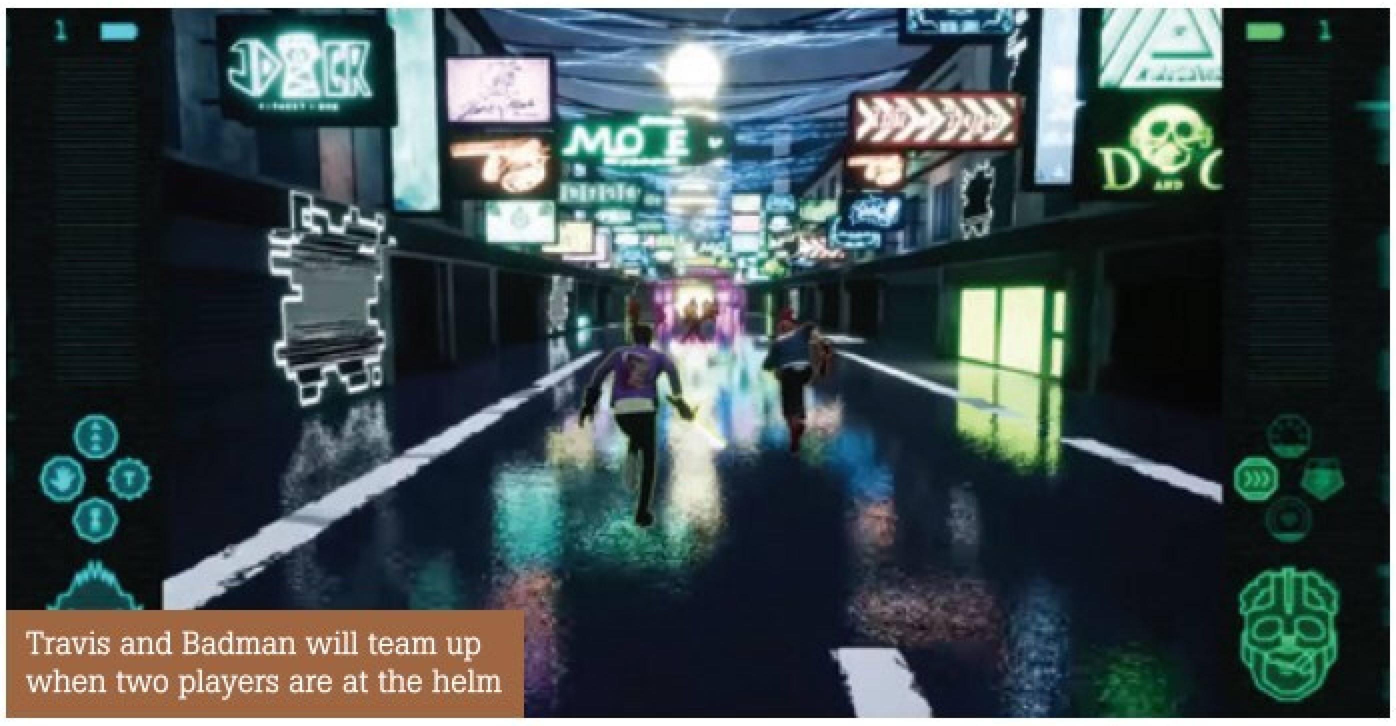
» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

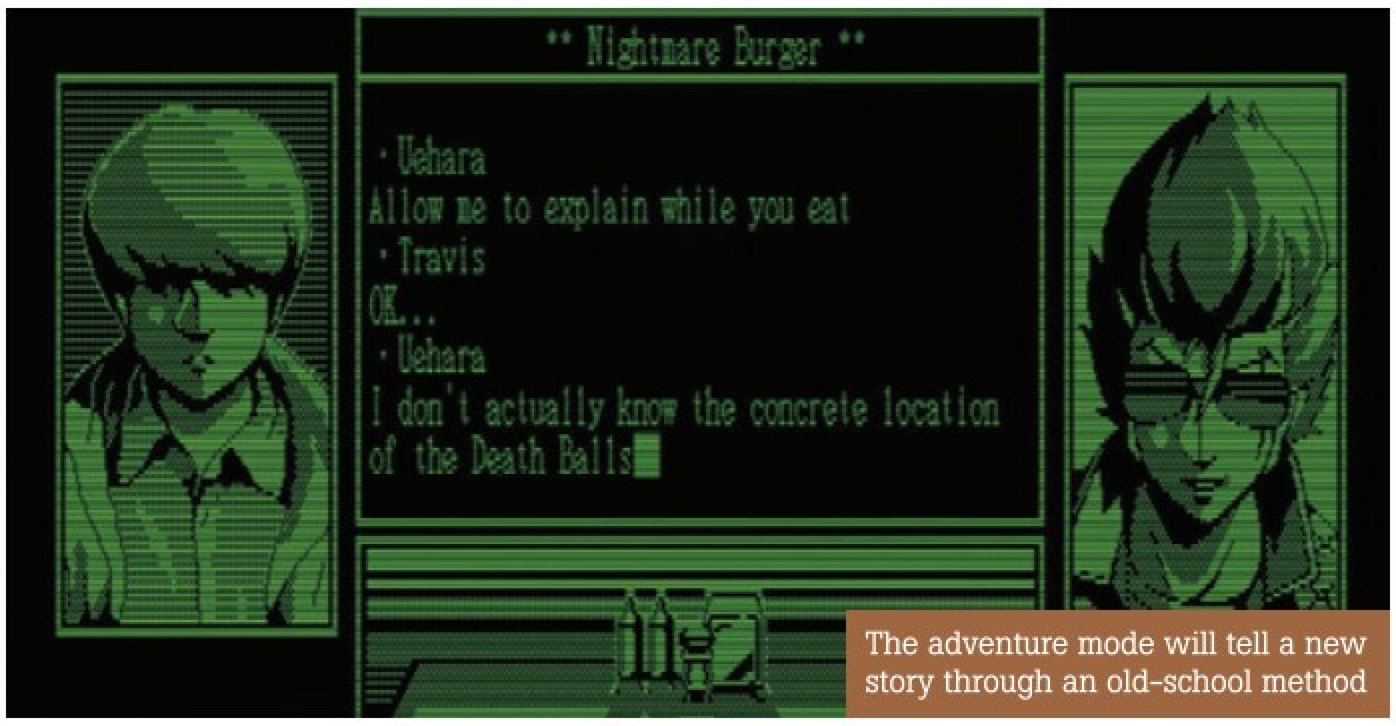
» Publisher
Marvelous Entertainment

» Developer
Grasshopper Manufacture

» Release
2018



Travis and Badman will team up when two players are at the helm



** Nightmare Burger **

・Uehara
Allow me to explain while you eat
・Travis
OK...
・Uehara
I don't actually know the concrete location of the Death Balls

The adventure mode will tell a new story through an old-school method

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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

The Lost Child

Saving the world one legend at a time

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • Vita

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
NIS America

» Developer
Kadokawa Games

» Release
Summer

Sawaki Takeyasu is best known as director of the psychedelic cult hit El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron. Now he's back with another project based on that same mythical concept of angels and demons in strife, entitled The Lost Child.

Set in the same universe, this spiritual successor even includes an appearance from Lucifel, Enoch's guide in El Shaddai. While the concepts and characters are familiar, this gameplay isn't the flashy action we saw in Takeyasu's previous project: The Lost Child is a turn-based role-playing game.

The game puts you in the shoes of journalist Hayato Ibuki, who is trying to solve the mystery behind a string of suspicious suicides in modern day Japan. While searching for answers, he encounters a strange girl pleading for help, bestowing upon him a mystical device that allows him to capture celestial and arcane creatures from legends called astrals.

Not only do you visit Tokyo districts such as Shinjuku and Ginza, but this dungeon crawler has Hayato exploring so-called "Layers." These spaces between our world and other dimensions are full of horrific demons and other celestial beings that you encounter via turn-based battles.

Every floor has riddles to solve and supernatural beings to recruit. You can capture more than 100 astrals, which can evolve through three forms and learn a plethora of different moves. Based on things like number of enemies defeated or steps taken on given floor, you receive karma, which can be used to level up your astrals. These creatures come in three forms: demons, angels, and fallen angels. You can even transfer skills to customize them to your liking.

The game sounds very much in the vein of Shin Megami Tensei, even allowing you to determine the fate of the world. Hopefully, it carries its own unique style and flair like El Shaddai to make a name for itself.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

Shining Resonance: Refrain

Making a Shining comeback

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Media.Vision

» Release
Summer

After a decade of absence in the West, the Shining series is back with an HD remaster of Shining Resonance, which was previously exclusive to Japan. The Shining series earned fame with its tactical gameplay, but entries after the Sega Saturn focused on action/RPG combat. Shining Resonance: Refrain continues that trend, receiving comparisons to the flashy, action-packed combat of Bandai Namco's Tales series.

The story follows a timid young man named Yuma, who is locked away for possessing the Dragon's Soul, which puts target on his back as one of the few to retain access to a dragon's power. Every party member acts as a role model, preparing Yuma for the hardships he will face, from a courteous priestess named Kirika to the outspoken Sonia, who pushes Yuma to step outside of his comfort zone. Dramatic insight, comical interactions, and even romance are featured in a bevy of side stores.

Like recent entries, Shining Force Resonance focuses on music, with all party members' weapons doubling as instruments. By performing sessions in battle, instruments grant buffs, such as enhancing speed or increasing an enemy's vulnerability. In addition, every party member has a unique playstyle, complete with different moves; you control only one at time, with up to four characters participating in any given battle.

Sega is not only boosting the visuals to 1080p for this remaster, but is also including all the PS3 DLC. A new "Refrain" mode lets you engage with new content and party members, such as the Excella and Dragonslayer Jinas (who were popular but unplayable in the original). The new mode caters to fans who have already played the game, and offers more insight into these characters.

This looks like the Shining series' best shot at captivating North American audiences again. Hopefully it does and the classic series can redeem its reputation.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

Little Dragons Café

Cooking with fire

Yasuhiro Wada is best-known for the Bokujō Monogatari series (which has been called both Harvest Moon and Story of Seasons in North America), but the veteran developer's latest title veers away from traditional farming to create a different sort of simulation.

Little Dragons Café has you managing a small restaurant, which includes learning recipes, gathering ingredients, and cooking food for the locals. Though your café is your base of operations, most of your time is spent exploring, hunting down the items necessary to make your food a hit.

Once you have what you need for your recipes, you prepare the dishes using a rhythm-based mechanic.

While that may sound similar to other shop sims, this one has an added twist: You also raise a dragon. As you dish out food and affection, your dragon assists your café in various ways. "The dragon will help obtain ingredients that you can't directly obtain, hunt for you, etc.," Wada says. "Also, as the dragon grows, players will be able to go to places that they couldn't go previously."

This intersection of different elements makes Little Dragons Café different from Wada's previous projects, but it also won't seem completely alien to fans. "The specific gameplay will be different from Bokujō Monogatari," he says. "However, in the sense of players progressing in the game by deciding 'What should I do today?', it might be similar."

With restaurant management, cooking, exploring, and raising a mythical creature, Little Dragons Café has a lot going on. "It's a very difficult game to express with a single genre," Wada says. However, any chef knows that a successful dish uses a variety of ingredients to bring out the best of each.

» **Joe Juba**

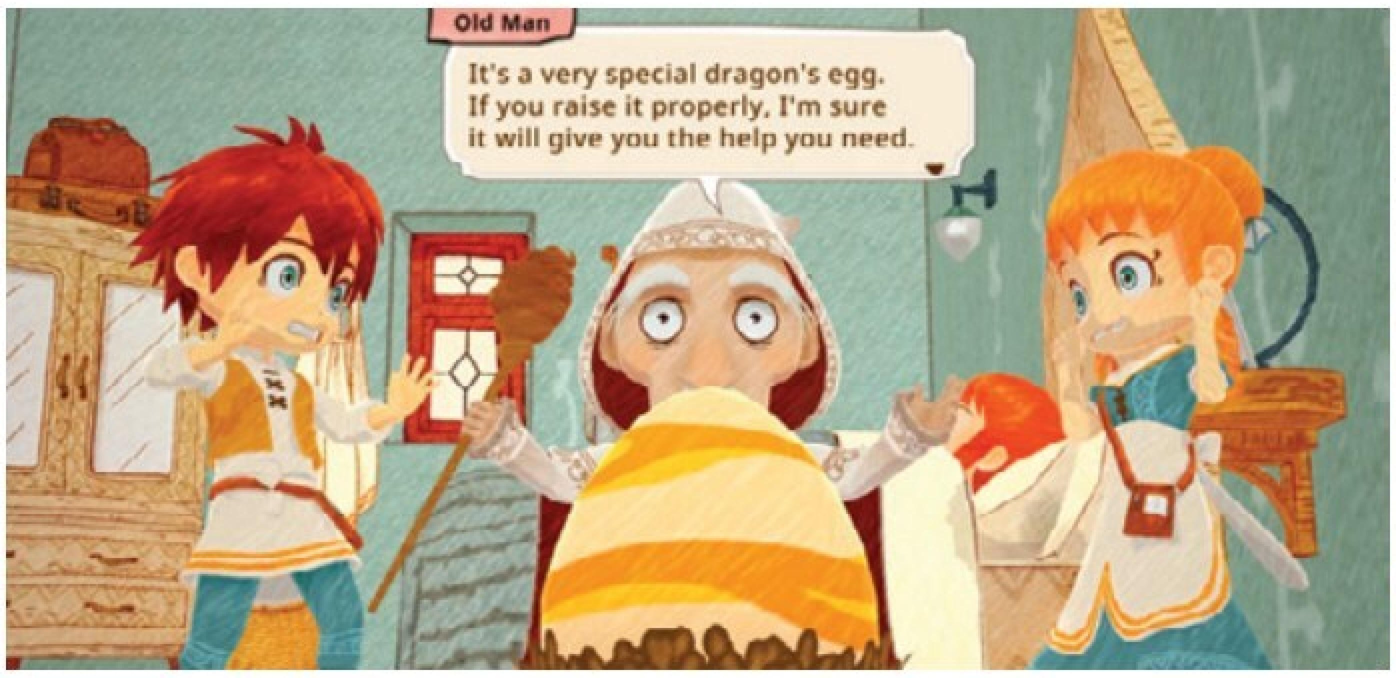
» Platform
PS4 • Switch

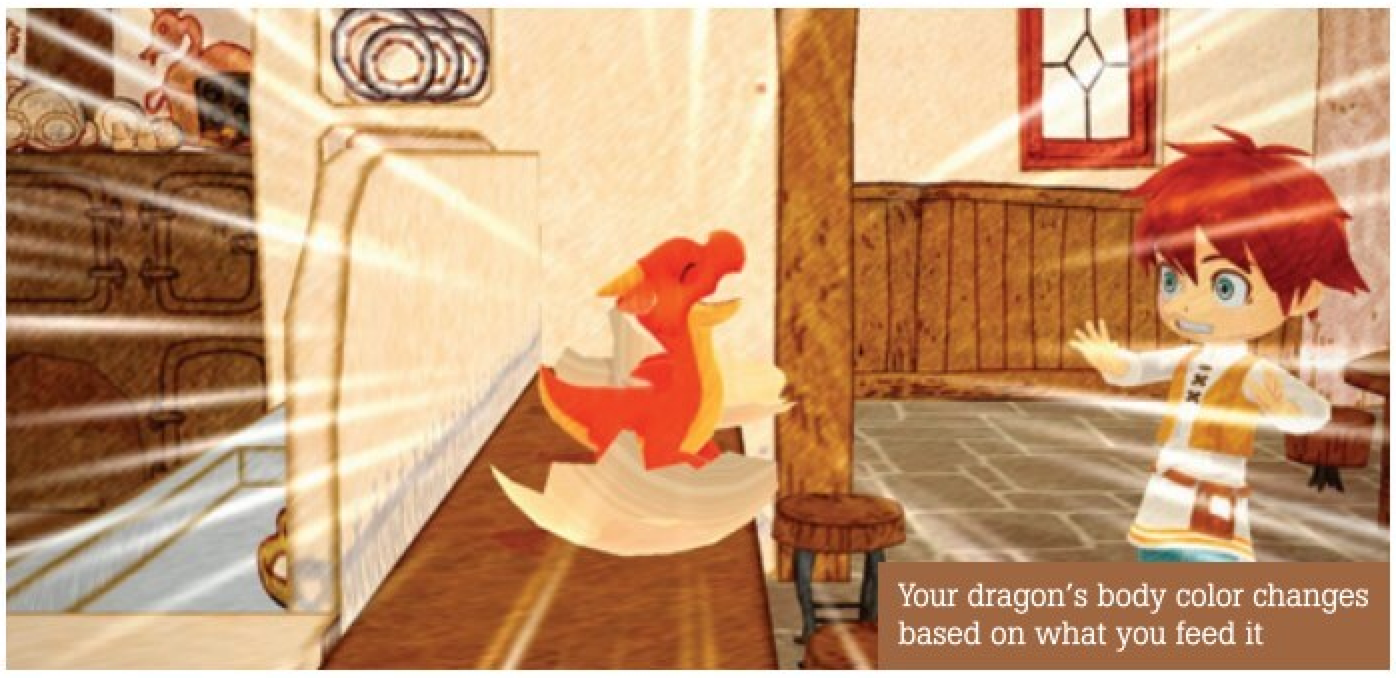
» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Aksys Games

» Developer
Toybox, Inc.

» Release
Summer


Old Man
It's a very special dragon's egg. If you raise it properly, I'm sure it will give you the help you need.


Your dragon's body color changes based on what you feed it

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gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

86 Yakuza 6: The Song of Life

Yakuza 6 may be the end of Kazuma Kiryu's tale, but Sega sends the Dragon of Dojima off in style. This unpredictable action/RPG blends street brawls and wacky activities; explore Japan, sing karaoke, manage a baseball team, or build up a clan of loyal followers. No matter what you do, a captivating story and fun progression keep you engaged from beginning to end.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Your April Fools' Day joke.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR IN THEATERS APRIL 2018

Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

Building an imperfect union

8

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Level-5 **Release** March 23 **Rating** T

PS4 • PC

» Concept
Learn what it means to be a king through a combination of combat, exploration, and city-building

» Graphics
A beautiful, animated style brings the characters and monsters to life. Though the famous Studio Ghibli isn't formally involved in this sequel (as it was with the original), the visuals remain impressive

» Sound
Fully voiced dialogue is surprisingly infrequent considering the size of the game, but the musical score is solid

» Playability
Accessible controls make it easy to fight and navigate, though the interface for kingdom management gets more complicated

» Entertainment
Plenty of short- and long-term goals keep you invested, and you are thrown into the action relatively quickly. Watching your kingdom grow and flourish is the biggest draw, though the battles also provide simple fun

» Replay Value
Moderate

No government is perfect. While many idealistic concepts give birth to new nations, the implementation of those ideas usually strays from the intent – and yet, governments can succeed and thrive despite their imperfection. Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom is the same. It chronicles the monarchy of King Evan with an ambitious framework that includes elements of traditional role-playing, city-building, and real-time strategy – which all sounds amazing in theory. In reality, these concepts fall short in their execution and leave the game's full potential conspicuously unrealized, but those missed opportunities don't prevent it from being charming or entertaining.

There you are, Your Majesty.

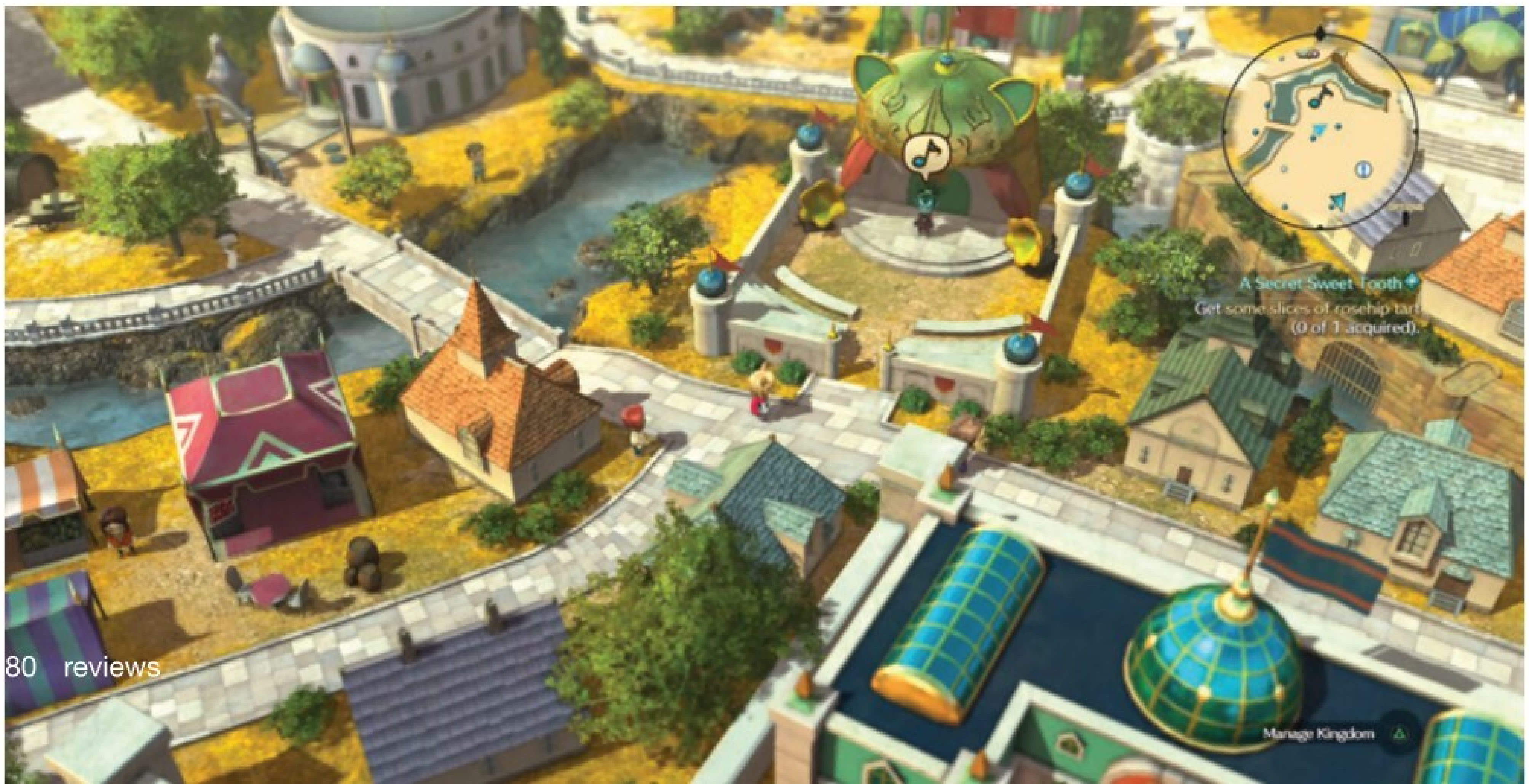
Ni no Kuni II is a brand-new story, and doesn't require any familiarity with the first game. It follows Evan, a young ruler forced to leave his homeland and start a new kingdom from scratch. I can't exactly say the narrative is bad, but the straightforward fairy tale doesn't go anywhere interesting. You collect a handful of archetypical party members, but after their initial introductions, they fade into the background and stop playing any notable role in events. Because of this, most characters never grow; you know everything you're going to learn about the smart and confident sky-pirate princess as soon as she joins your party early on. This means advancing a lot of dull text-box conversations that don't convey much in terms of personality (due to sparse use of voiced dialogue and full-fledged cutscenes), and cast members who feel like interchangeable cardboard cut-outs.

Though the story didn't keep me interested, the gameplay propelled me forward thanks to a clever kingdom-building system. Your realm, Evermore, starts as a meager encampment and grows into a sprawling city as you upgrade abilities, recruit specialists, and build structures like farms and shops. The brilliance here is how Evermore functions as your primary progression system. If you want better armor, upgrade the outfitters. If you want better items, invest in the general store. I was completely hooked on this loop; I loved chasing down sidequests that lured new residents to my kingdom, and the abundance of available tasks always provides something enticing to pursue. Plus, I like how currency and items accrue in the background as time passes, so no matter what you do (even if you're just standing idle), you're making progress.

With things like weapon development and spell upgrades, much of what you accomplish in your kingdom funnels into combat. Battles are fluid and action-driven, letting you control any party member in real time and take down crowds of monsters with various techniques. The simple system is accessible and fun, but it is also the nexus for the myriad ways in which Ni no Kuni II's ideas need refinement. Fights may be entertaining, but they also don't provide much challenge, so you don't have any incentive to learn its intricacies. For instance, you can craft and level up a vast array of magical helpers called Higgledies to assist you, but you can also get by just fine with a basic set, so the extra effort seems pointless. And despite your ability to upgrade spells, magic isn't more efficient or useful than basic skills, so that endeavor also feels like wasted resources. The optimizer in me still enjoyed digging through my options and mowing down my opponents, but ultimately, my reward was making an already-easy game even easier.

A secondary combat system involves more strategic encounters that have Evan controlling a small army, but this idea feels half-baked. A basic rock-paper-scissor dynamic generally determines victory, so choosing your four units before the encounter carries much more tactical significance than any decision you make on the battlefield. I enjoyed getting new units and bolstering the strength of my forces, but the limited scope and clunky controls of these conflicts hold them back. I enjoyed engaging in these skirmishes occasionally for a change of pace (or to get a new citizen), but they were usually on the bottom of my to-do list.

Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom may not nail everything it attempts, but it gets the important things right. Building your kingdom is satisfying and engaging, even with the weak narrative hooks. The cycle of rewards became an obsession, and had me staying up late to recruit just one more ally, or complete just one more upgrade. Combat could be tighter, and other supporting elements could use some polish – but like any kingdom, this experience isn't about individual contributions. It's about how those contributions come together, and the fun of this experience as a whole outweighs its flaws. » **Joe Juba**



A Way Out

A not-always-dynamic duo

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Hazelight Studios **Release** March 23 **Rating** M

A Way Out must be played with a partner in crime, creating cooperation, antagonism, and communication between the game's two characters, Leo and Vincent. Fugitives on the run, the pair confront a wide gamut of experiences, bringing them together both in the shared purpose of revenge and even in understanding. That the game creates a connection between the characters, and to a lesser extent the players as well, is a measure of success, but that doesn't mean the title always hits its intended mark.

In their attempt to break out of jail and track down the man who has done them both wrong, Leo and Vincent are bonded in spirit and in gameplay. A Way Out often divides into splitscreen (vertical and horizontal) to show both players what their characters are doing, letting each person move around and act freely simultaneously. Apart from some occasionally hard-to-hear audio mixing when there are two different conversations occurring at the same time, the screen system works well. It's not distracting to watch both screens at once if necessary, and the switch to a single screen is also effective.

The ultimate expression of this co-op vision is the game's hospital scene, which unfolds in a cinematic single cut that follows both men as they simultaneously evade the police in different parts of the building. The action is not boring visually or physically, and you're focused even when the game camera wipes over to the trouble your comrade is in.

Unfortunately, swaths of the gameplay in the title are less absorbing, consisting of simple button presses or mashing that don't always match the possible excitement of what's going on. During the jailbreak sequences, for instance, the gameplay and tension of the moment don't always match up effectively. Leo and Vincent often have to work together, but the gameplay doesn't do justice to the title's central component: the characters' solid bond. Moving dumpsters, boosting your partner to a ledge, and performing simple R2 button presses isn't interesting as the game progresses.

Hazelight introduces some co-op-focused side activities in the world, from a Pong-like arcade cabinet called Grenade Brothers to darts, baseball, and arm wrestling. But they aren't that engaging, and they slacken the narrative tension rather than fleshing out the world. You can press square to screw in a lightbulb in a barn, but that doesn't make the game better.

I enjoyed the way Leo and Vincent's journey ended, as it fits the characters and the co-op format. But even with all they go through from robberies, torture, and family interludes, I wasn't attached to their relationship. Hothead Leo is endearing and well voice-acted, but Leo and Vincent don't have the bond-through-banter that Uncharted characters might, for example. It's fitting that a relationship born of the need to escape prison and defeat a shared enemy comes off as one of convenience that's not strengthened even through gameplay. While A Way Out is not a choice-based game per se, the fact that the decision points that are supposed to encapsulate each character's worldview don't actually have repercussive effects in the world (you end up at the same places no matter what) or affect the pair's relationship only dulls their identity.

A Way Out's co-op vision is a bold choice that works because it uncompromisingly places players in a co-op context, joining them onscreen and off. But given the weakness of the gameplay at times, perhaps the game isn't bold enough. » **Matthew Kato**

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A pure co-op experience about two jailbirds on the run looking for revenge

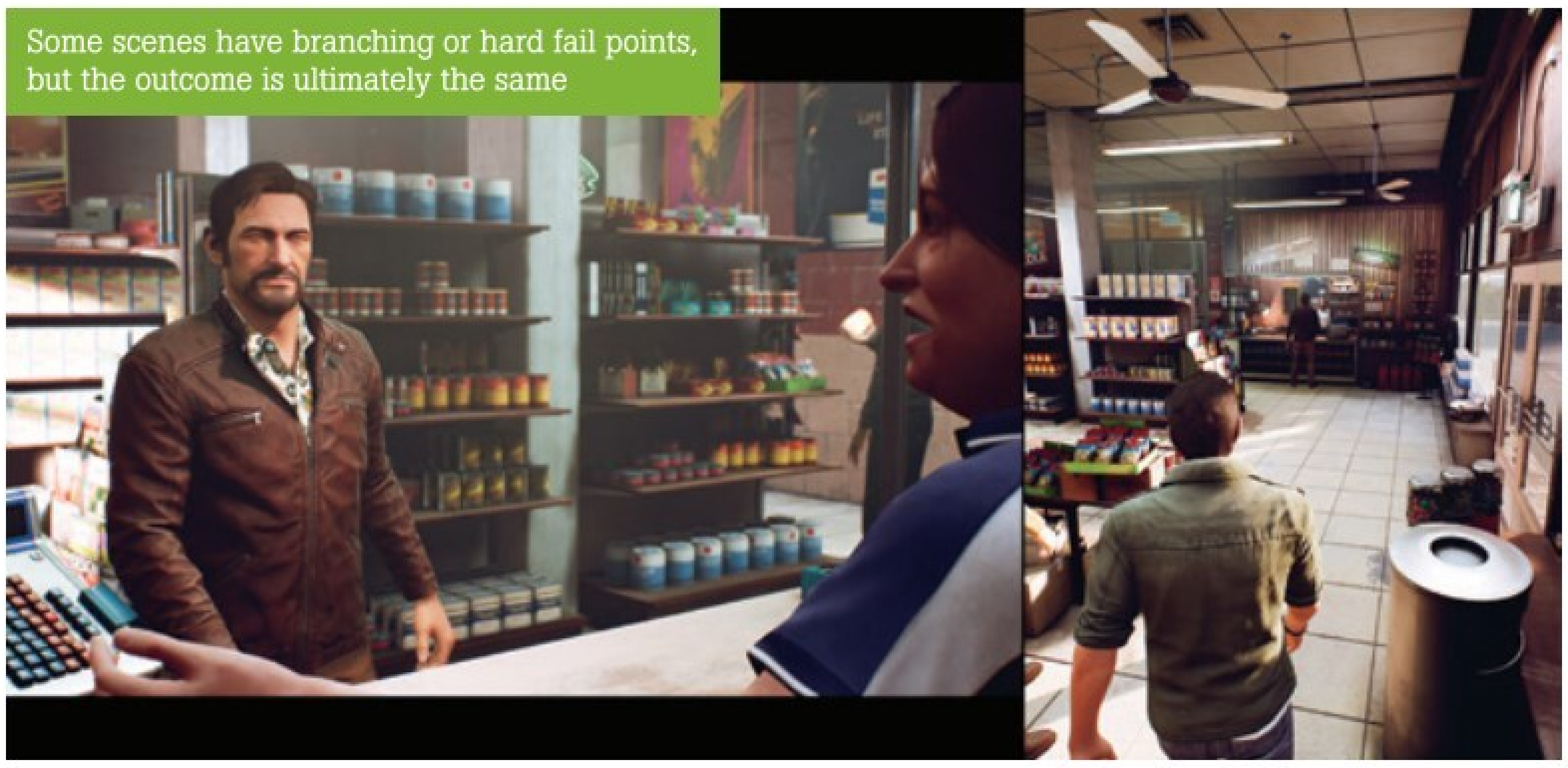
» **Graphics**
Models' lip syncing isn't the greatest, but overall the game looks solid

» **Sound**
The voice actor for Leo – performed by the brother of creator Josef Fares – does a particularly good job conveying Leo's rough and impulsive personality

» **Playability**
The gameplay does not ask anything demanding from players, sometimes at the detriment of the title

» **Entertainment**
The premise, and occasionally its execution, has its moments, but A Way Out feels like a vision not fully realized

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



Some scenes have branching or hard fail points, but the outcome is ultimately the same

Action scenes like this one aren't on the level of an Uncharted, but they work well enough

Kingdom Come: Deliverance

A noble quest In need of divine intervention

5.75

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Warhorse Studios **Release** February 13 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Forgo the familiar fantasy tropes of elves, orcs, and wizards for a massive open-world RPG grounded in real-world history

» Graphics
Character models get reused too often and objects are blurry and simplistic when viewed up close. The countryside vistas you explore are worthy of a postcard

» Sound
Aside from the jaunty tavern tune that is sure to get stuck in your head, Kingdom Come's soundtrack is largely forgettable. The quality of the voice acting varies dramatically

» Playability
Combat is slow and methodical, demanding patience and practice to master. The detection for interacting with objects can be finicky

» Entertainment
Kingdom Come serves up an intriguing personal story and a detailed world worth exploring. However, on a technical level, the game is broken

» Replay Value
Moderate

Despite offering an endless tapestry of intriguing tales to draw from, the events of history remain criminally ignored by video games. Sure, exotic locations like ancient Egypt and decades-old wars occasionally serve as flashy backdrops for modern action, but too few games try to convey what life was really like in a historical time and place. Kingdom Come: Deliverance eschews the fantasy tropes of other open-world RPGs in favor of the real-life characters and conflicts of 15th century Bohemia. Unfortunately, the engrossing feudal adventure awaiting players is brought to its knees by a needlessly restrictive save system and a litany of game-breaking bugs.

One of the most successful outcomes of Kingdom Come's focus on realism is the story. Instead of guiding an almighty warrior to predestined greatness, you play as the unassuming son of a blacksmith whose world is turned upside-down when an invading army pillages his village. Kingdom Come succeeds in not only conveying the historical events of its small slice of European history to the player, but doing so from a peasant's perspective; much of the political dealings affecting the fate of Henry's home country are entirely out of his control. The best he can do is serve Sir Radzig Kobyla and a small council of other Bohemian lords, while hoping their efforts to retain power intersect with his own thirst for vengeance.

Henry's limited means make Kingdom Come's story feel personal in a way few games manage, and offer up plenty of meaningful choices and surprises along the way. Some quests take Henry on hours-long diversions, such as engaging in drunken reveries with a wayward priest, or entering a monastery disguised as a monk to track down a reformed bandit. The narrative is far from perfect (particularly the ending, which feels more like the cheap tease for a sequel than a thoughtful commentary on Henry's lot in life), but it kept me going.

Kingdom Come's focus on realism also results in a variety of intriguing gameplay systems, from the absurdly in-depth alchemy system to the demanding combat that takes hours to fully comprehend. Every skill Henry can learn – be it lockpicking, weapon maintenance, or even reading – offers another rabbit hole to devote his days to. The perks you earn from progressing are less compelling, as many confer stat penalties in addition to whatever they're buffing, but I still enjoyed learning the ins and outs of every activity.

Unfortunately, a few decisions made in the name of realism frequently drag Henry's adventure to a crawl. Kingdom Come's save system is downright draconian, requiring you to either drink an expensive and limited potion (that also makes you drunk), or track down and sleep in a bed you own just to back up your progress. The fast-travel system, meanwhile, is a blatant misnomer, as it requires you to watch an icon slowly travel to the desired location on your map, sometimes for 90 seconds or more. Waiting and sleeping also require staring idly at a wheel for no discernable reason, and are longer and more frequent than other RPGs that use the same convention. Kingdom Come's gameplay is already slow and laborious to begin with, and these systems add nothing to the experience except pointless downtime. Kingdom Come is not more challenging or intense or even more realistic because of these additions. It's just more tedious.

The save system is elevated from "annoyance" to "fatal flaw" in the wake of the game's ultimate downfall: bugs. While my first 10 hours or so were relatively issue-free, the further I got, the more things fell apart. Collision issues left me permanently stuck in bushes, rocks, and other unstable geometry, requiring save reloads. I experienced over a half-dozen hard crashes, randomly caused by basic actions like opening my map, pulling up the quest log, and unsheathing my sword. At one point the "surrender" prompt became a permanent addition to my HUD, forcing me to reload. Broken questlines consumed countless hours of progress, and in some cases compounded each other; I had one mission grind to a halt when an NPC was unable to sleep in his bed at an inn, because an NPC from a previous broken questline was still sleeping there. I lost four hours of progress in one session alone when the game inexplicably disabled saving of any kind.

After logging more than 100 hours into Kingdom Come, I shudder to think how many more hours I lost to bugs. Simply put, this is the kind of game where you should be saving every five minutes to safeguard your progress – except you can't.

Ultimately, Kingdom Come feels a bit like homework. If the historical setting and focus on realism appeal to you, then the deep gameplay systems and methodical pace are worth learning. If you'd rather be a magic-wielding wizard or the unequivocal hero, on the other hand, the source material will bore you almost instantly. Even if you are as in love with the premise as I am, however, the countless technical issues Kingdom Come requires you to suffer through land it in the stockade; until the developer brews up a comprehensive salve of patches and polish, you should avoid Henry's adventure like the plague.

» Jeff Marchiafava

Metal Gear Survive

Stripping a solid series for parts

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami Digital Entertainment **Developer** Konami Digital Entertainment **Release** February 20 **Rating** M

Metal Gear Survive is the first entry since Konami and series creator Hideo Kojima's contentious split, and it shows. It features a non-canon, spin-off story and veers away from its stealth roots in favor of a survivalist approach. But while that might sound like heresy to fans, the most damning thing about Survive is how it squanders its own promise. It buries Metal Gear Solid V's fantastic core mechanics beneath an abysmal campaign, skewed survival systems, and a tedious grind for resources.

Metal Gear is known for its intriguing, over-the-top geopolitical narrative, but that isn't part of Survive. The story distances itself from the rest of the series' fiction, as the Captain (you) gets sucked into a wormhole that opens up in the aftermath of the XOF attack on Mother Base at the end of Ground Zeroes. While that sounds interesting, the campaign spends far too much time justifying progression loops instead of constructing an interesting story, and the few tantalizing threads lead to tepid payoffs. If you're looking for a plot that enriches the Metal Gear universe, prepare to be sorely disappointed.

The controls and mechanics of Metal Gear Solid V anchor most of Survive. Traversing Dite (a hellscape version of MGS V's map) and sneaking up on unsuspecting zombies feels great. The Dust, a harrowing dark zone where your objective markers disappear and your oxygen drains, make missions tense as you're constantly on the clock. Melee weapons are sometimes awkward to wield, but combat becomes more diverse and fun as you find new weapons, defenses, and traps.

Layered on top of this skeleton are various meters to manage as you build up your character and base. Survival is difficult at first; during my first dozen hours, where and how I'd score my next meal was always on my mind. While the idea of scavenging for food isn't inherently flawed, your hunger and thirst drain too quickly. This constantly interrupts the fun of traversing Dite. It eventually gets easier to fill yourself up, but I still I spent large chunks of time wading through menus, figuring out the best way to feed myself and manage my resources and weapons.

The campaign was practically over by the time I had stocked my base camp with water, livestock, and staff, which made building them up unrewarding. They ultimately serve as pipelines for more resources, which is Survive's reward for just about anything. You're encouraged to keep playing after you've finished the main story, but aside from discovering a few secrets and opting into defending your base from waves of zombies, the post-game consists of tedious treks across Dite, doing the same rescue and scavenging tasks multiple times.

You also unlock new weapons and ammo to use, but they require too much micromanagement. Rare weapons are broken when they drop, and you must spend resources before you can equip them. Maintaining gear (which degrades with use) is costly, and even rare weapons become dull so quickly that I held off on using most of them until I had amassed the copious amounts of materials needed to maintain them. This killed the excitement of obtaining a cool new weapon, since I knew I'd have to grind out a few more missions before I could use it.

Co-op pits you and three other players against waves of bad guys, and it's much more fun than playing the solo campaign. Coordinating with others to gather materials, build up defenses, run among various groups of enemies to fend them off, and tackle side missions presents of fun mix of things to do. Although you work with your team to get the most loot, you also need to be selfish. Killing enemies, completing side missions, and building up defenses scores points, and the winner at the end of each match receives a hefty bonus. This mix of cooperation and competition can be frustrating at times, as you sneak up behind an enemy guarding a side objective only for a teammate snatch up your rightfully earned points, but also offers a good incentive for everyone to pull their weight.

Unfortunately, you won't be of use in co-op or get much out of it until you're several hours deep into single-player story, since you have to progress through the campaign to unlock new maps. Though harder difficulties offer satisfying challenges (like defending two key objectives instead of one), the five current maps all share the same wave-based setup and aren't enough to keep the grind for resources fresh.

This is when Survive's microtransactions encroach on the experience. You can pay real money for extra character slots, as well as boosters to enhance your experience and resource gains. Common resources like iron and wood come easily, but rare materials are doled at low quantities, giving rise to a nagging urge to spend real money to speed up the process. Additionally, the time between waves in the single-player base defense can last as long as an actual day, but you can expedite the wait by paying real money (which is tempting when the next wave is set to arrive at six in the morning). You get a daily log-in bonus of currency, but the amount is pitifully minor; it takes days (and even weeks) to amass a useful amount with this approach.

Metal Gear Survive doesn't fail due to its baggage or expectations – it blunders entirely on its own merits. Its co-op suite shows promise and could become legitimately great in time, but the rest of Survive is a boring, grind-heavy slog where the biggest reward is simply more stuff. For as many bits of metal, wood, and fabric I had after 70 hours of play, I couldn't help but think I'd wasted all of my time. » **Suriel Vazquez**

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Use Metal Gear Solid V's controls and engine to create a survival game, then add a waved-based cooperative mode

» Graphics
Reused mesas and jungles from The Phantom Pain look fantastic, but the wooden animation gives the characters the liveliness of mannequins

» Sound
The score is mostly understated, though you get to hear several tracks from the Metal Gear and larger Konami repertoires in the online lobbies

» Playability
Running, sneaking, and exploring feel great, but the highly emphasized melee combat is clumsy

» Entertainment
Metal Gear Survive has plenty to do, but the story mode is a dud and the endgame loops don't hold up

» Replay Value
Moderate

Pit People

War and laughter

Style 1 or 2-Player Strategy **Publisher** The Behemoth **Developer** The Behemoth **Release** March 2 **Rating** T

8

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Help blueberry farmer Horatio and his merry band of comrades take on an evil, destructive force bent on bringing misery to mankind

» **Graphics**
Pit People's world and battles are beautifully illustrated and animated

» **Sound**
The upbeat soundtrack is a great mix of fun songs that fuel your battles with pep

» **Playability**
An odd strategy system takes a battle or two to get used to, but Pit People falls squarely into the "easy to learn, difficult to master" style of tactics games

» **Entertainment**
Though its battle system isn't revolutionary, Pit People mixes brain-teasing battles with a barrage of great humor that makes it an enjoyable jaunt through a fun and colorful world

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Let it never be said that indie developer The Behemoth hasn't carved out its own unique identity thanks to the studio's blend of stylish art and offbeat humor. Following on the heels of Castle Crashers and BattleBlock Theater, Pit People channels the exaggerated art style of its predecessors while embracing a more strategic mode of gameplay. The result is a romp of a game that rewards you with hilarious jokes for dominating foes on the battlefield.

Pit People embraces absurdity out of the gate, opening on a blueberry farmer named Horatio fending off cannibals who want to eat his son, Hansel, while the world is showered in green goo and a cosmic narrator mocks the farmer. Things only get wackier from there, with Horatio going on a quest to rescue his son after the bear kidnaps him, recruiting a gallery of characters to help out. Though Horatio doesn't have much personality, the crew surrounding him is hilarious and memorable, like Sofia, an explorer who passionately claims every new area you come across in the world "in the name of Spain." You also have a literal cupcake named Gluten to serve as your healer, and the mischievous-yet-loyal cyclops Yosef.

Your quest takes you through an overworld filled with every biome imaginable: deserts, snowy plains, forests, candy mountains, and cities made of circuit boards. Pit People's world doesn't have a unique identity, since more than anything it exists as a series of disparate environments stitched together. But that ultimately works, because it draws attention to Pit People's biggest offerings: zany characters and battles.

The battle system is an odd blend, eschewing a surprising amount of unit control for a hexagonal battlefield where placement rules supreme. You can't specify which enemies your units attack. Instead, you move them within range of enemies, and they attack whatever foe is there. If multiple foes are within that unit's range, they randomly strike one of them. This lack of control can be frustrating, like when the enemy with a sliver of health remains on the field because your unit attacks the foe next to him, but it also adds a kind of unpredictability that's often missing from strategy games and can have its own rewards.

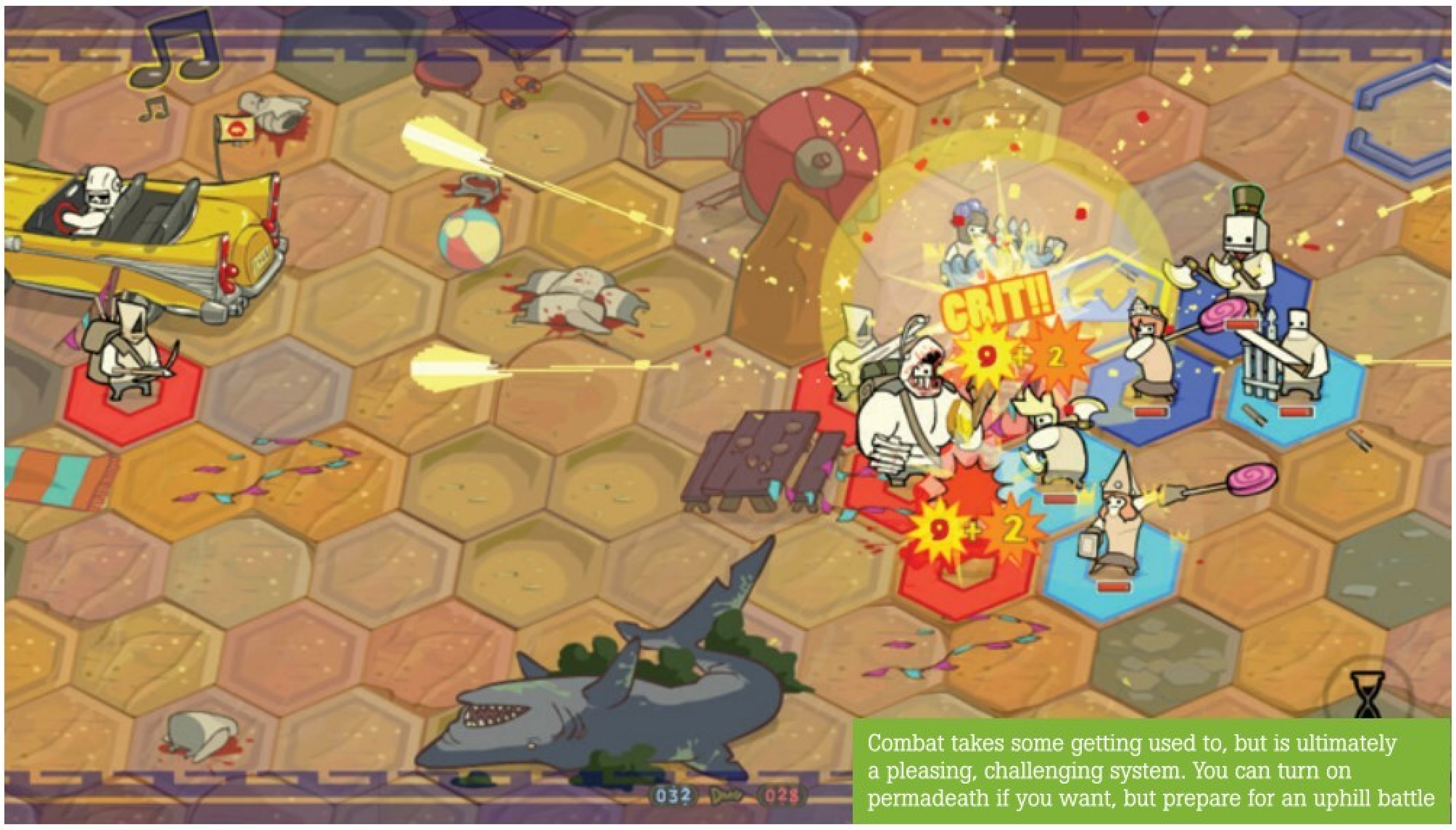
At least half of the strategy in Pit People comes from pre-battle preparation. You have a certain number of slots in your party. You obviously want attackers and defenders, but how do you break that up? Do you have an archer for your long-distance attacks? Or a mortar? Do you sacrifice two spaces in your party to make room for a cyclops capable of dealing heavy physical damage? Should you bring a healer even though your units regain health when they level up in battle? Once the encounters start in Pit People, you've already made the important decisions that determine the flow of the fight. Ultimately, I think the uniqueness of this setup makes for a more interesting strategy game, but arriving to a battle and being screwed from the get-go because you don't have the right unit can be frustrating.

Pit People is a ridiculously funny game. If you're fan of Monty Python's wacky brand of humor, you'll feel right at home with the jokes here. Whether it was the mocking and villainous space bear, who acts as the game's narrator, or the whimsical Loki-like Jerkimedes tricking me into slaughtering a retirement home of cupcake people (oops), Pit People had me in stitches.

Pit People does a lot of things right, but it also has abundance of unnecessary systems that give rise to mild frustration. For example, when you leave your town to go out into the world, you have a limited inventory that you can use to store healing items, recruitment items, and the spoils of battle. If you're completing side quests littered throughout the world, that inventory fills up quickly. And since there's no fast travel to your home, you have to constantly journey back to to your base. This is tedious, especially since the fog of war on the overworld never goes away, meaning you have to constantly check your map to see where you're going.

When all is said and done, it's the potential for laughter that proves to be Pit People's standout achievement. The tactical gameplay is interesting and entertaining, but the comedy is the star of the show here. I enjoyed my time with The Behemoth's new, funky world, as well as the cast of lovable characters who inhabit it, and will fondly remember many of its gags for a long time to come.

» **Javy Gwaltney**



Combat takes some getting used to, but is ultimately a pleasing, challenging system. You can turn on permadeath if you want, but prepare for an uphill battle

Sea Of Thieves

Fun in a shallow pool

Style 1 to 4-Player Online Action **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Rare **Release** March 20 **Rating** T

Sea of Thieves is like the kiddy-pool at the waterpark. They're both pirate-themed, they both feature fun activities improved by having friends with you, and they're both shallow in the interest of keeping things entertaining without being dangerous. The stories Sea of Thieves gifts you and your crew are jubilant and silly, but many elements of the experience left me wanting, even when it delivered on the pirate life.

From the beginning, developer Rare has pitched Sea of Thieves as a pirate simulator, and its execution on the core idea is impressive. It lets you manage and sail a ship on the ocean, find hidden treasure, pillage, and drink grog until you stumble and puke all over the bar. Participating in these scenarios with friends is where the game shines. Working together to steer the ship, land on an island, and dig up treasure is incredibly satisfying and almost always leads to laughs, regardless of whether you're successful.

Nearly every play session results in a story, whether you are suddenly ambushed by a kraken while trying to deliver a treasure chest, or your friend who always screws everything up crashes the boat into the dock and sinks your ship. These moments are joyful, and show Rare has succeeded in manufacturing a digital playground that is fun to explore.

Digging deeper in Sea of Thieves' assorted tasks, however, reveals the long-term game doesn't offer much incentive to keep playing. You level up your reputation by completing assignments for the three trading companies which each offer different types of missions. The reward for completion is the opportunity to take on increasingly complicated tasks. The Gold Hoarders, for example, start you with "X marks the spot" maps, but you graduate to full rhyming riddles that require counting paces from landmarks. These offer the most worthwhile rewards in the game, but it ultimately feels moot considering what you can do with your money.

Sea of Thieves' various systems make the experience a double-edged cutlass. Every purchasable item is cosmetic and expensive, which keeps the playing field level, but also means you don't have anything worthwhile or enticing to save up for. Plus, Rare has leaned so hard into the pirate theme that none of the outfits, weapons, or items look cool or distinct. They all just feel… piratey. Rare has confirmed microtransactions are coming to the game eventually, but paying real money for items won't make them any more enticing.

You won't find much in the way of a tutorial, which is great for onboarding your friends who just want to start playing with you as soon as possible, but it also means you might be chasing pigs around an island for an hour without figuring out how to catch them. Attacking other players in the open world is exciting, representative of the pirate life, and often hilarious. However, when you and one friend have been working together for an hour to collect multiple chests and a group of four kills you right in front of the redemption point and steals your booty, it is infuriating.

Locking your crew into groups of two, three, and four from the outset fosters comradery and commitment, but adding a friend in the middle of a session is complicated, which goes against the social nature of the game. Combat and shooting shies away from complexity in order to keep it fun for all skill levels, but it feels bland as a result. In most cases, I understand the logic behind these mechanics, like having ship-sailing be a hands-on process to keep everyone communicating and engaged, but it doesn't always make the pirate-life more fun.

Sea of Thieves' highs are high. Hearing the clank of your shovel against a chest as you dig feels great, and physically carrying it to the goal is emotionally rewarding (even if it isn't monetarily rewarding). Exploring the ocean while playing music together with co-op partners on your boat is silly and fun, and watching the sun rise from the bow of your ship as you carry your spoils home is a novel experience. The core mechanics of an innovative co-op journey can be found here, but the carrot being held out in front your ship is unfortunately small and unappetizing. » **Kyle Hilliard**

7

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Simulate the pirate life in a cooperative online experience

» **Graphics**
Rare leans into the pirate theme hard with an attractive, cartoonish style. The water, environments, and sunlight effects are particularly impressive

» **Sound**
Sailing the seas is a quiet experience, but the creaks of the boat and splashing of the water sell the simulation. When music appears, it accentuates dramatic moments with appropriately piratey music

» **Playability**
Combat and gunplay are both underwhelming, but moving around your ship and swimming work well

» **Entertainment**
Sea of Thieves can be tedious, and it lacks a compelling progression hook, but it excels as a cooperative story generator for you and your friends

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Yakuza 6: The Song Of Life

The Dragon's fiery conclusion

9.25

PS4

» Concept
Wrap up Kazuma Kiryu's story in an appropriately epic and occasionally wacky finale

» Graphics
Yakuza 6 is easily the best the series has ever looked, and exploring in the first-person view is the closest you can get to being in Japan without the jetlag

» Sound
The voice acting shines, and the ambient sounds of Hiroshima and Tokyo are perfectly captured

» Playability
Kiryu is ready for everything, whether it's time to break bikes over backs, belt out a tune, or hit the arcades, thanks to intuitive and responsive controls

» Entertainment
Yakuza 6 delivers both quality and quantity, so saying goodbye to Kiryu doesn't feel rushed

» Replay Value
Moderately high

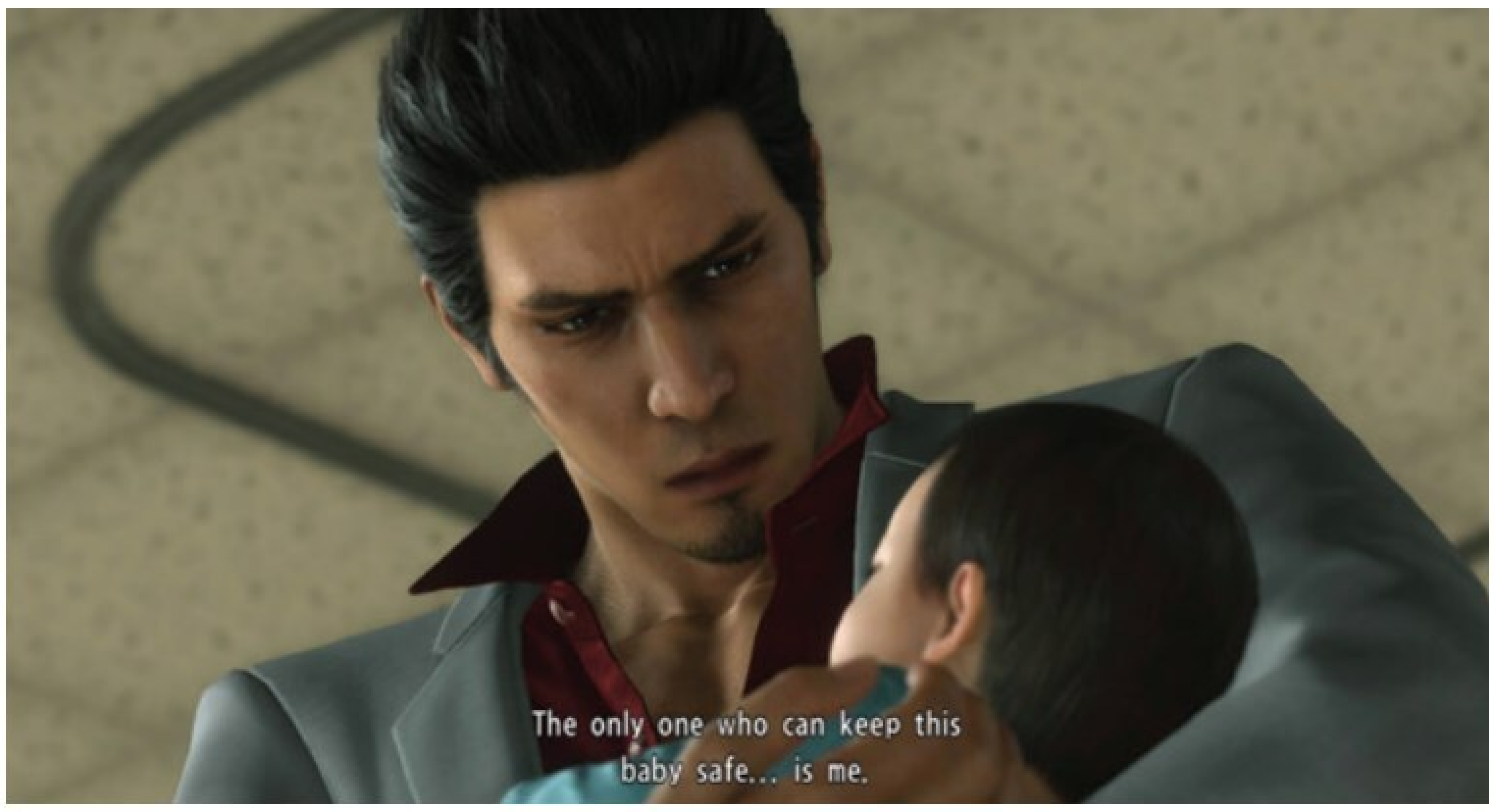
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH
gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Sega
Developer Sega **Release** April 17 **Rating** M

The Yakuza series is stronger than ever, with the recent wave of PlayStation 4 remasters and a new prequel game bringing Kazuma Kiryu to appreciative new audiences. Just as those fledgling fans are figuring out what loyal Yakuza players have known for more than a decade, Yakuza 6 comes along and upends it all. The latest entry in the series may mark the end of Kiryu's tale, but don't worry; Sega gives The Dragon of Dojima the sendoff he deserves.

Without getting too deep in the weeds, Yakuza 6's story centers on Kiryu's adopted daughter Haruka Sawamura, who is struck by a hit-and-run driver early on. She was holding a child at the time of the event, and that child's identity is paramount to the overall arc. The long story is told through an abundance of cutscenes, but I was engaged throughout. Players who are concerned about jumping into the finale without having played through all the other games shouldn't worry, either. While the story is complicated, it's largely self-contained. The game cleverly provides context for the important players in the world, and in rare instances when a cameo or reference didn't click for me, I never felt lost.

The story provides broad motivations, but much of the Yakuza 6 experience is about making your own way through the world. Between Kamurocho's familiar neon playground and the comparatively calmer Onomichi in Hiroshima prefecture, Yakuza 6 gives you plenty to do. The two locations are a joy to explore, and they're brimming with optional activities. Kiryu has a lot of time on his hands, and I looked forward to every opportunity to keep him busy.



Many of the missions provide rewards that feed into two of your biggest diversions; the people you help often want to join your baseball team or help take down gangs in your new Kiryu Clan. I've spent my fair share of time in Yakuza's batting cages, and it was satisfying to show off my skills while managing my own crew of sluggers. I didn't find the clan missions (which are basically tower-defense, minus the towers) quite as interesting, but I was still compelled to complete them all.

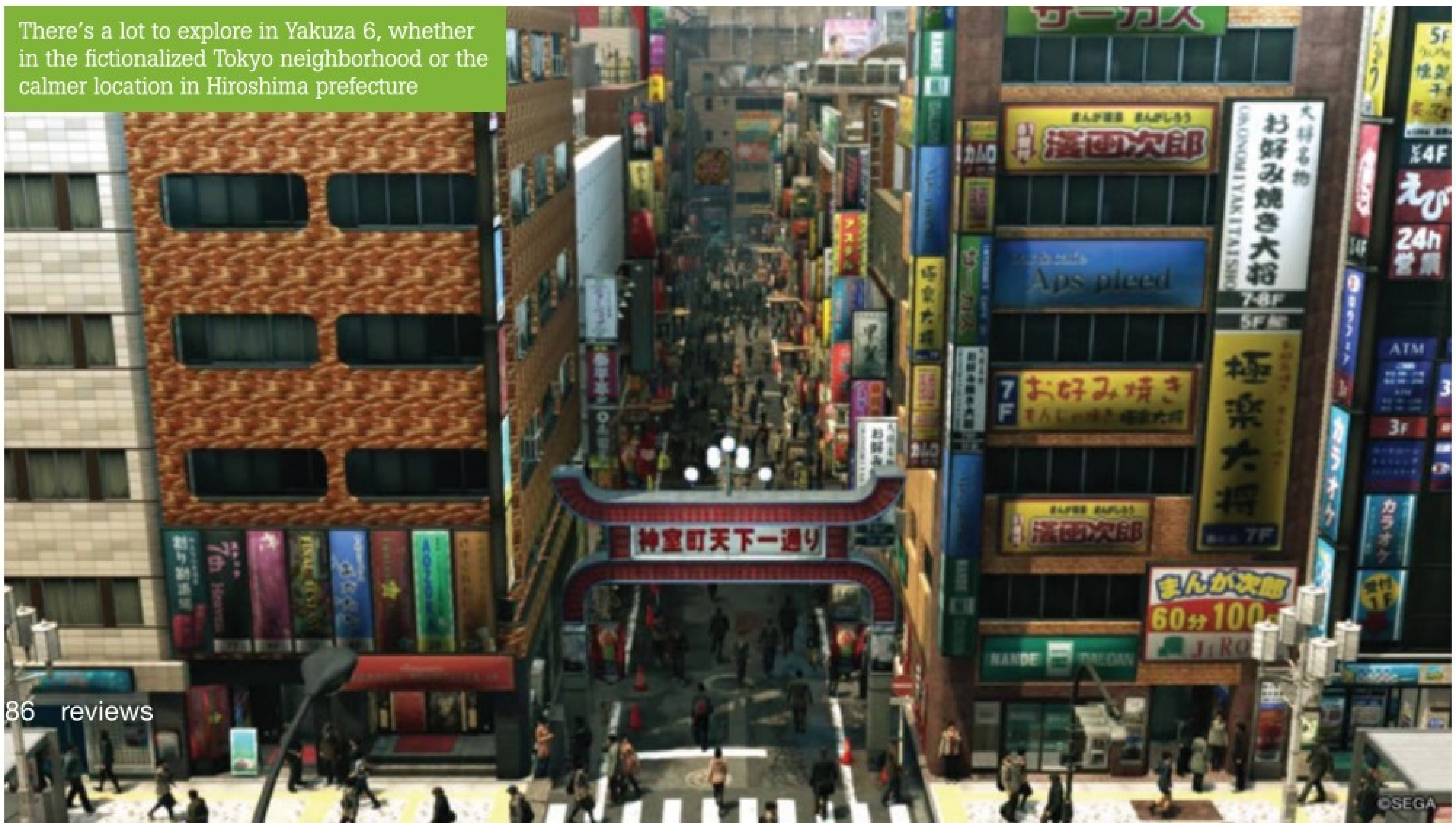
The brawler-style combat feels satisfying, whether you're swinging your fists or whatever random props you can grab, and I appreciate little touches like the way terrain affects how you take down goons. Getting into scraps is quick, too, which encouraged me to seek out encounters even near the end of my adventure. Dragging enemies into stores, where the battles continue, is particularly fun – probably because I didn't have to worry about picking up the mess. Thanks to a reworked leveling system, I improved abilities and unlocked moves the way I wanted, rather than having to work my way around a preset ability grid. All these little elements help deliver an exhilarating sense of freedom.

One of my favorite things about Yakuza 6 is that it delivers surprises at such a steady clip. Kiryu's quest has life-and-death stakes, but he's pretty much down for whatever along the way. If you're interested, you can spend countless hours in side missions and other activities, including spear-fishing, babysitting, and chatting up ladies online. Japan's citizens have their share of issues, too, which don't necessarily involve gang warfare. I eagerly lent a hand to everyone who needed help, partially because the rewards can be great, but also in large part because these side missions are so delightfully strange. More importantly, it's a blast. A typical Yakuza 6 session – if such a thing exists – can include darts and karaoke, before concluding with a goofy quest to retrieve an engagement ring from an errant robotic vacuum. The game does a great job in delivering both a meaningful and emotionally resonant story, as well as some of the weirdest, silliest stuff I've seen in a long time.

As fun as it all was, I'm still sad to see Kiryu off. He leaves the series on his own terms, and the conclusion is a fitting tribute to the character. One of the things I've liked most about him is how he remained decent, even though his lifestyle frequently put him into contact with decidedly less decent folks. Kiryu approaches the bizarre situations he encounters with grace and empathy, while also bringing a righteous rage when necessary. I'll certainly miss Kiryu, but we clearly haven't seen the end of Yakuza.

» Jeff Cork

There's a lot to explore in Yakuza 6, whether in the fictionalized Tokyo neighborhood or the calmer location in Hiroshima prefecture



H1Z1

Solid survival shooting

Style 150-Player Online Action **Publisher** Daybreak Game Company **Developer** Daybreak Game Company **Release** February 28 **Rating** T

8

PC

» Concept
Drop down into a brutal free-for-all, scavenge for gear, and be the last person standing

» Graphics
Not completely realistic and not completely cartoonish, the mix retains some realism while getting crazy with skins and cosmetics

» Sound
Crisp sound effects convey critical information of battles nearby or slinking footsteps creeping up from behind

» Playability
Extremely easy to hop in and play, especially in the combat zone where you can train for future domination

» Entertainment
With a variety of game modes, H1Z1 offers a solid battle royale experience with lots of customization unlocks

» Replay Value
High

The concept of H1Z1 is simple: Hit the ground running, grab a backpack and whatever weapon is handy, and head to the safe zone while blowing away 149 opponents. Anything can happen during a match, including stealthy shootouts from behind crates, getting shot in the back while trying to cross an open field, and snagging a risky airdrop for some potent weapons and armor. Variety is the spice of life, and it's also the cornerstone of H1Z1 that keeps you coming back for more.

The core mode can be played solo, with a friend, or with a team of five, so you can enjoy the bloody melee without having to worry how many friends you have around. Making it down to the final circle of play while dodging airstrikes, bullets, and poison gas is often a thrilling experience, and you can go from hero to zero with the single crack of a shotgun. Whatever your skill level, making it to the last moments of a match is fun and frantic, and snack-sized stories often happen along the way. A player who gives away their location with proximity voice chat by accident when his mom calls him downstairs for chicken tenders, the player who just does donuts in a cop car around a warehouse waiting for someone to come pick a fight, or the jaded sniper waiting for you on top of the final hill. These are all memorable moments that make a match interesting and engaging.

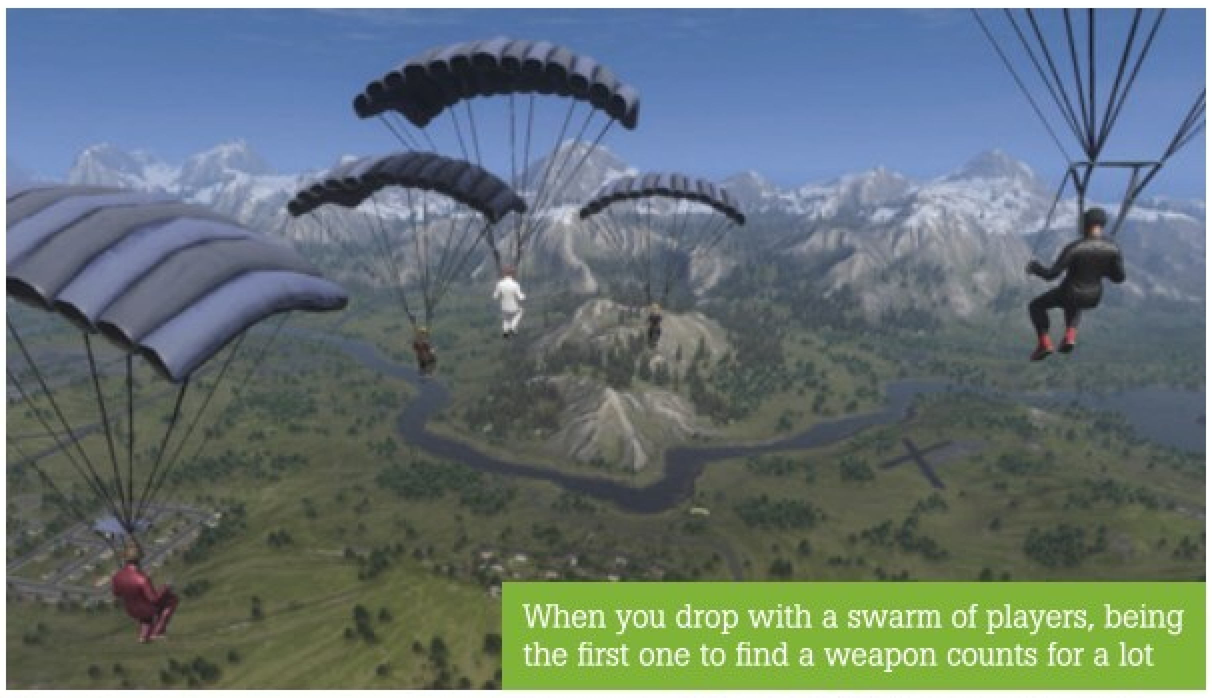
The one-life, last-person standing structure creates a high-tension slaughterhouse that is the bedrock of H1Z1, but it has other neat modes that differentiate it from battle royale competitors. One is Combat Zone, which lands players in a small playing field, forcing tons of immediate action for all participants, and everyone starts fully loaded with a rack of weapons ready to rock. More importantly, it also allows players to immediately respawn and get right back into the endless battle.

Combat Zone is an excellent way to get a handle on how weapons fire, combat tactics, and more in a zero-stress environment. It is the perfect aperitif if you're a seasoned player looking to practice with certain weapons, or if you're a new player who wants extra trigger time before stepping into a mode where the stakes are higher.

Getting behind the wheel in the standard game is a powerful way to zip around the ever-shifting field of play, but vehicular gameplay is taken to a new level in the Auto Royale mode where teams are stacked into cars at the beginning of the game. You can't get out of the vehicles, so your driver had better be adept at slamming on the nitro boosts, hitting the jump pads, and plunking down land mines while the rest of the team unloads buckets of ammo at supply crates and opposing vehicles. If your car goes up in smoke, that's the end of the match for you.

The novelty of Auto Royale is fun for a few rounds and a nice palate cleanser, but it lacks the compelling gameplay loop of the core mode and ultimately feels like a tacked-on diversion.

H1Z1 has some cool modes that give it some extra oomph, but the field of battle royales already has some excellent choices. H1Z1 has a solid foundation of scavenging, shooting, and surviving, but it needs a little more vim and vigor to really compete in the battle royale free-for-all. » **Daniel Tack**



When you drop with a swarm of players, being the first one to find a weapon counts for a lot

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine

A soulful journey through America

9

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Good Shepherd Entertainment
Developer Dim Bulb Games, Serenity Forge **Release** February 28 **Rating** NR

PC

» Concept
Travel through 20th century America and collect engaging folklore stories to trade with other travelers

» Graphics
Each region is beautiful, from Montana's looming mountains to New Mexico's desert terrain. Gorgeous illustrations help paint a picture for the short stories

» Sound
As you traverse different states, each area has a distinct and alluring sound in genres like bluegrass and jazz. Characters are brought to life with fantastic voice work, including a devil wolf voiced by Sting

» Playability
The controls are simple and smooth as you journey through different regions and click through text adventure-like stories

» Entertainment
Where The Water Tastes Like Wine shines with its incredible voice work, well-told stories that take on lives of their own, and many profound moments

» Replay Value
Moderate

Wandering through the countryside, you hear whispers of devastation, unemployment, and dust storms that ravage people's homes. Other moments bring you courage in your tired journey, as you listen to a worker's hopeful song or watch hundreds of butterflies flutter overhead. Whether they're tragic, surreal, or humorous, each of these occasions are just as captivating as the next as you watch them grow into fantastical tales told around a campfire.

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is an adventure game about sharing stories. It paints a fascinating historical picture of Depression-era America embellished by folklore, as you (a skeleton) travel the country and visit small villages and big cities. You can hitchhike or take a train to make travel easier, but this is still a slow-paced experience. That isn't a bad thing; the pacing is a perfect thematic fit, and it makes for a pensive experience that slowly provides twists and turns with every intriguing discovery. You visit rural areas often, finding interactive short stories in old mills, farms, and winding paths. Each takes only a minute or two to complete, telling you a strange tale about a camera that brings death to those it photographs or a simple story about a boy and the bond he shares with his dog.

Every short story you encounter is told with a beautiful illustration, and a gruff narrator helps build the scene. These stories present themselves as tiny text adventures, and as you continue to venture out, they become embellished as word spreads. It's always amusing to see what form an original story takes next and how much further it is from the truth, as though you're playing a game of broken telephone. For example, two men mistaking themselves for brothers later becomes ludicrously misunderstood as eight identical men from eight different mothers falsely believing that they're siblings.

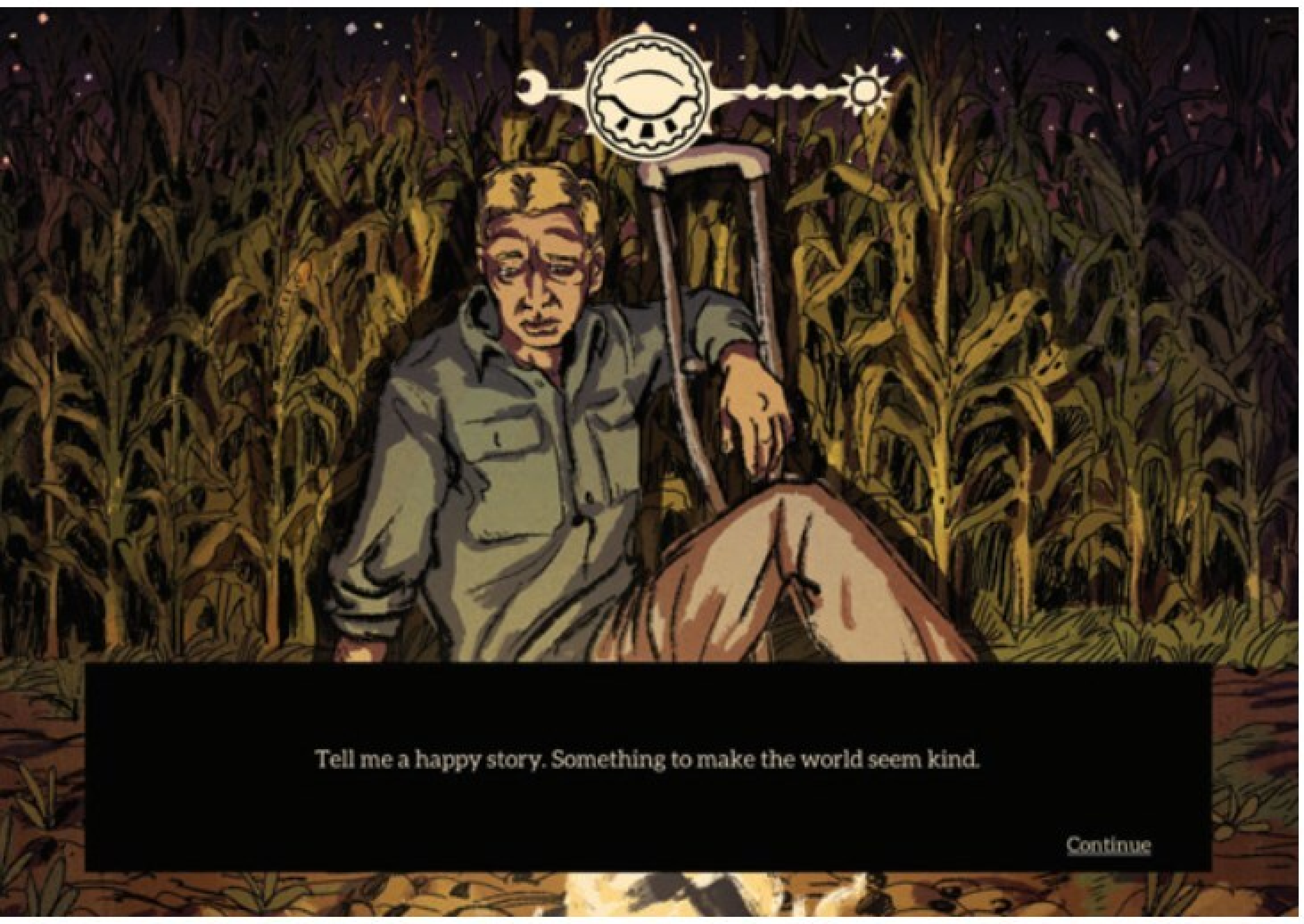
The tone of these narratives becomes important when you encounter other travelers and sit by a nighttime campfire with them. This is the crux of Where The Water Tastes Like Wine's gameplay. Your collected stories act as currency in a series of interactions that progressively unfold through different chapters. This is a compelling concept that requires both keen planning and insight. You equip specific stories beforehand, and then during conversation, you choose them from a selection of tarot cards that have themed categories like authority and family.

Every character wants something different, which brings a welcome variety. A young homeless boy abandoned by his family loves action-filled anecdotes, whereas a somber coal miner may prefer a lighter tale to remind him that hope still exists. My only gripe with these tales is that you can't listen to the vignettes again once they're completed, and with over 200 to collect, I sometimes forgot a story's message or tone.

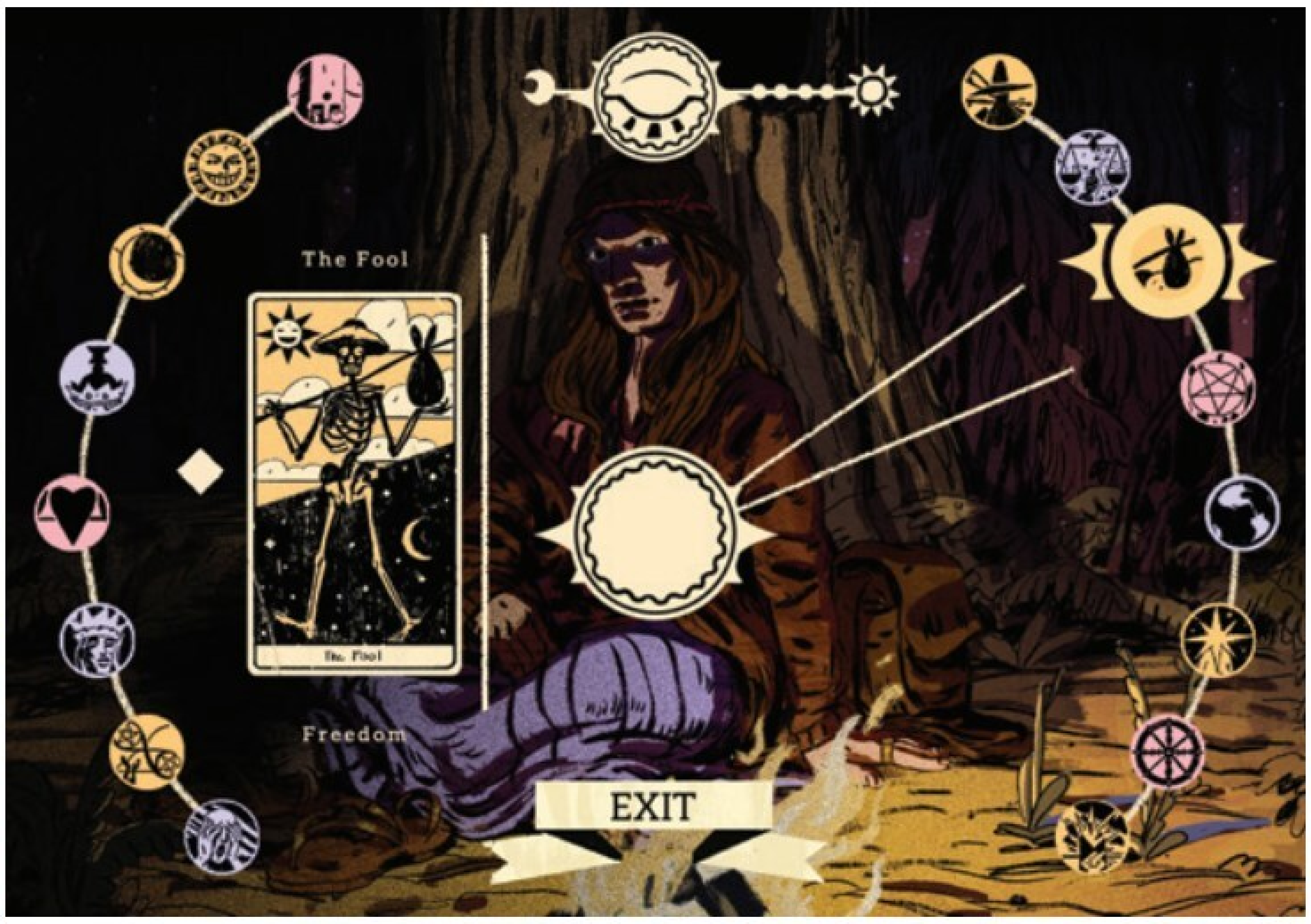
These fireside interactions, however, make up my favorite moments. The goal is to get characters to open up so that you can collect their stories too. They begin to trust you if you tell them the tales they wish to hear. In their ending chapters, characters' illustrations evolve into something symbolic, such as a priest struggling with his faith seen trapped in an angel's headlock. I curiously awaited these transformations, eagerly wondering how these gorgeous artworks would portray a person's plight in a creative way.

Though much of Where The Water Tastes Like Wine's focus is storytelling, it also has some light survival mechanics. If you're not careful, you can meet an untimely death by overexerting yourself or letting your health get too low. Certain stories may physically injure you, and hopping a train without paying can leave you beaten by a cop. Accessing train stations in big cities requires cash, which you can acquire from odd jobs or sometimes by luck. Managing these needs and funds is a small but engaging addition, immersing you into the world and adding bigger stakes to decision-making.

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is a surprisingly beefy adventure game, offering over 20 hours of content and a treasure trove of stories that never cease to entertain. I laughed, reminisced about my own life, and enjoyed meeting the colorful cast of characters who opened up to me as time went on. Whether I was reminding travelers of their worth or offering an ear so they could share their sorrows, I felt as though I brought them peace in an almost spiritual fashion. Like a Grim Reaper collecting souls, I instead collected the essence of short stories, to help others struggling with demons find their way. It makes for not just a captivating experience, but an empowering one I won't soon forget. » **Elise Favis**



Tell me a happy story. Something to make the world seem kind.



Into The Breach

Pulling back the layers

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Subset Games **Developer** Subset Games **Release** February 27 **Rating** N/A

9.25

PC

» **Concept**
Travel back in time to confront giant monsters before they devastate humanity in this grid-based tactics game

» **Graphics**
Attractive but elementary pixel graphics clearly communicate the layout of any given battle

» **Sound**
A stirring musical score adds drama and lends increased weight to the sci-fi tone

» **Playability**
A thoughtfully constructed difficulty curve makes this game immediately understandable, but challenging to master with each new unique mech squad

» **Entertainment**
The simple presentation belies a deep and engaging gameplay loop that unfolds over multiple playthroughs, as new unlocks completely change required tactics

» **Replay Value**
High

Simplicity and elegance go hand in hand in many mediums, and Into the Breach demonstrates that the same can apply for game design. After the remarkable success of FTL, Subset Games has crafted a follow-up that maintains the same structural progression and addictive replayability, but tacks away toward a fascinating hybrid of turn-based tactics and puzzle gameplay. The result is a cleaner and tighter game than FTL, and one that is more fun, strategically complex, and consistently rewarding.

Kaiju-like giant monsters have devastated the world, but the distant and ruined future has given rise to technology that might have made the difference: vast mechs with the power to end the threat before it shatters humanity. In one threatened timeline after another, you travel back in time and save what you can. Into the Breach's slick sci-fi hook feeds the endless loop of roguelite playthroughs that players confront. Each play session is filled with new weapons to acquire, like boulder flingers and lightning-tinged smoke. You receive new battle objectives to surmount, from saving a passing train to terraforming the land. Whether charging into a battle with a squad of flaming behemoths that singe the towering creatures to a crisp, or using positional powers that maneuver each beast into its ally's line of fire, the flexibility of tactical options is continually impressive.

Across a series of distinctly tiled islands, players tackle one grid-based tactical battle after the next, each with semi-random events and procedurally generated layouts. The small 8x8 grid, countdown-to-victory turns on a given stage, low hit points, and limited weapon options on any given unit all combine to keep battles brief and constrained. But that constraint makes every action and unit on the board essential and powerful. Nothing is wasted, and almost every single turn can be a dramatic victory, or the end of your whole playthrough.

In these turn-based encounters, enemies telegraph everything about their forthcoming actions, so each time your mechs can act, you're faced with a devilish tactical dilemma facilitated by often-diabolical enemies. Frequently, the solution lies in finding that one narrow window by which you can avoid disaster for just one more round, like pushing a scenario-ending boss into the water in the last turn before he destroys an essential objective. While playing your turns at a lightning pace is possible, I had more fun examining each turn like an intricate puzzle. Sometimes, only after minutes of staring did I suddenly have that "aha" moment that would completely thwart the enemy and set up a perfect counterattack.

At first, unit action options seem uncomplicated. Pull an enemy one space. Strike a distant target over obstacles, but only in a straight line. Punch something to move it back one square. But those easy-to-grasp fundamentals only get you so far; you never seem to have enough firepower to hold the line. Instead, the fascinating interplay between both your allied units and enemy actions save the day. Punch the giant bug into the line of fire with one mech, so your artillery can hit it again, and in so doing pull another baddie into a space where it inadvertently blasts another foe into corrosive acid. Nailing these intricate combos feels amazing. And because even a keen eye sometimes misses a crucial element, you have the chance to rewind time and restart your turn once every battle, helping encourage experimentation.

Whether your playthrough ends in success or failure, each attempt leads to new achievements, mechs, and unique time travelers, which in turn opens the door to additional achievements the next time around that are attainable only with your newly acquired units. New options unlock at a steady and satisfying pace, demanding attention to objectives, but without long periods of stalling out. More importantly, new mechs dramatically change the way you play, helping every playthrough feel fresh and surprising. One squad might be built around damage-over-time, while another team is all about repositioning foes so they hurt each other.

As you make your way through one timeline to another, the other great triumph of Into the Breach becomes apparent – accessible, challenging play for virtually any skill level. Each difficulty setting is thoughtfully balanced and fun. Plus, you can make progress in your unlocks at whatever challenge level you choose. Once unlocked, you can confront any island in any order on subsequent playthroughs. After two completed islands, you can jump ahead to the final battle, or extend your timeline (and score) by confronting the remaining two islands; I love how this feature lets me curate my own session duration. That final island (in contrast to the inexplicable difficulty spike of FTL's final boss) offers a tough-but-reasonable confrontation that scales to how many islands you've completed.

Into the Breach demands concentration and lateral thinking, and some players may balk at the painful sacrifices that become necessary at higher difficulties, and how they arise from random factors of unit placement. Others may struggle at the necessity of such deliberate planning on each turn. But those are less faults of the game, and more variations in player taste. Subset Games has put together a carefully curated playground of tactical puzzles which hide behind a façade of simplicity. » **Matt Miller**

Kirby Star Allies

The pink puff goes on auto-pilot

6.25

Style 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** HAL Laboratory **Release** March 16 **Rating** E10+

Switch

» Concept
Kirby goes on a familiar adventure with three A.I. or human-controlled partners, sucking up bad guys to steal their powers

» Graphics
In the competition for the most generic-looking Kirby game ever made, Star Allies just edges out 2011's Return to Dream Land on Wii

» Sound
Kirby games always have fun, bubbly soundtracks. Star Allies kicks it up a notch with some impressive, full-size orchestration

» Playability
Kirby moves smoothly (and slowly), sucks up enemies easily, and comfortably bounces into the air with his signature inflation abilities

» Entertainment
Star Allies represents the height of complacency for the Kirby franchise. It looks fine, plays fine, and barely flirts with anything new until the final boss fight

» Replay Value
Moderately low

For better or worse, Kirby is Nintendo's most consistent franchise. New entries come often, and they don't stray too far from the "pretty good" mark in either direction. On that scale of inoffensiveness, Star Allies rests a bit on the low end, offering a bland Kirby experience with few new mechanics.

The premise this time around is evil things are invading Dream Land and Kirby must expel them by grabbing some friends and beating up bad guys. The twist for Star Allies is Kirby can throw hearts at select enemies to add them to his team. It can be played cooperatively with up to three others, but if you play alone, A.I. controls the partners. The game delivers standard-but-unsurprising Kirby action, but the last boss stands out as an interesting finale – though I won't spoil it here.

The option to play with friends is nice, and the Switch's Joy-Con setup makes jumping in and out of cooperative play easy, but the overall design suffers tremendously from the multiplayer options. Having four players makes combat a cakewalk. Kirby and pals steamroll their way through every encounter, and every boss is a breeze. As a series, Kirby titles are generally designed to be friendly to younger players, but when gingerly tapping the attack button without any regard for position or stolen ability is enough to complete any objective, it gets boring. Having A.I. partners makes things ridiculously easy, as they do most of the work; they can even solve puzzles for you before you get a chance to consider the solutions.

The last two mainline 3DS Kirby titles, Triple Deluxe and Planet Robobot, proved Kirby is capable of interesting level design, but Star Allies plays out as a series of flat, horizontal slogs. Apart from a few barrel-blasting sequences (in the style of Donkey Kong Country) and moments where Kirby and his partners roll along as one giant ball, you won't find much to do other than move from left to right.

Star Allies gets credit for a great soundtrack, great controls, and an epic finale. Even if the visuals are the epitome of generic Kirby, they look sharp. HAL delivers a polished Kirby experience here that plays well, but it ultimately amounts to a forgettable adventure that demands so little from the player that I sometimes felt like I was barely involved at all. » **Kyle Hilliard**

7
0
Francisca
P1 Beetle
P2 Blade Knight
P3 Wester
P4 Knuckle Joe

13
56
Attack
P1 Stone
CPU Blade Knight
CPU Driblee

Florence

An earnest tale about ordinary love

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Annapurna Interactive **Release** February 14 **Rating** E4+

Portraying love and relationships in games can be tricky, and developers often struggle with how much interactivity, or even significance, should be given to intimate moments. Florence, an interactive graphic novel, finds a powerful balance in its exploration of love, offering a breathtaking experience.

This breezy game puts you in the shoes of 25-year-old Florence, who is wrapped up in a mundane routine. She snoozes her alarm several times before waking up, mindlessly browses social media on the bus, and chats on the phone with her worrisome mother. When she meets Krish, a cellist whose music enchants her one day during a stroll, her world lights up. The relationship that unfolds has its share of ups and downs, as the two do a careful dance of growing closer and growing apart, making the game feel authentic.

Florence tells its story mostly without words and requires minimal interactivity, but this simplicity adds to its allure. For example, in several short chapters, you match pairs of numbers to help Florence's productivity at work or interact with a slider to put images in focus to advance a scene. These moments make the experience smooth, like conversation flowing naturally between two love-stricken partners. The simplicity keeps the focus on the narrative, so that I could better enjoy Florence's clever and creative methods of marrying its thematic visuals with interactivity without complicated or distracting systems.

Florence doesn't just excel at portraying good moments; it also appropriately enhances the tense scenes with distinct aesthetics and changes to gameplay. Florence's simple color palette can make the world comforting, while other times it makes more striking colors pop to accentuate strong emotions. For example, Krish's cello-playing is overwhelmingly alluring when Florence follows floating music notes that grow into a vivid yellow background, and arguments are jarring and uncomfortable when the two wear bleak grey attire as blood red speech bubbles zoom upward.

These fights are especially well done, as you try to fit puzzle pieces into speech bubbles quicker than Krish while harsh music plays. Though failing to be quicker doesn't come with consequences, it tilts your view like a sinking ship. This imagery immersed me, as I envisioned the argument like a fierce tug-of-war. I imagined what terrible things the two were saying to each other while tears fell down their cheeks silently.

Despite not having agency in the story's direction, I felt a connection to Florence. I cheered her on as she discovered new inspirations, and felt a knowing pang of sadness as she brushed her teeth solemnly without someone by her side. She's relatable in some of the simple ways all humans are – we all want to be loved – but she's also young, idealistic, and finds passion through those she admires. It makes her plight more engaging and relatable. My interactions helped her through this snapshot of her life as I eagerly turned the digital pages of what felt like a personal journal.

Florence is a beautiful experience that isn't afraid to tell an ordinary story. This isn't an action-packed, heroic tale or a somber story filled with tragedy, but it still hits some of those notes in subdued ways. Florence is happy, distressing, and admirable in its reflection of young romance, and it left me with a sense of unexpected hopefulness.

» **Elise Favis**

8

iOS

» **Concept**
Experience a heartwarming love story told through an interactive graphic novel

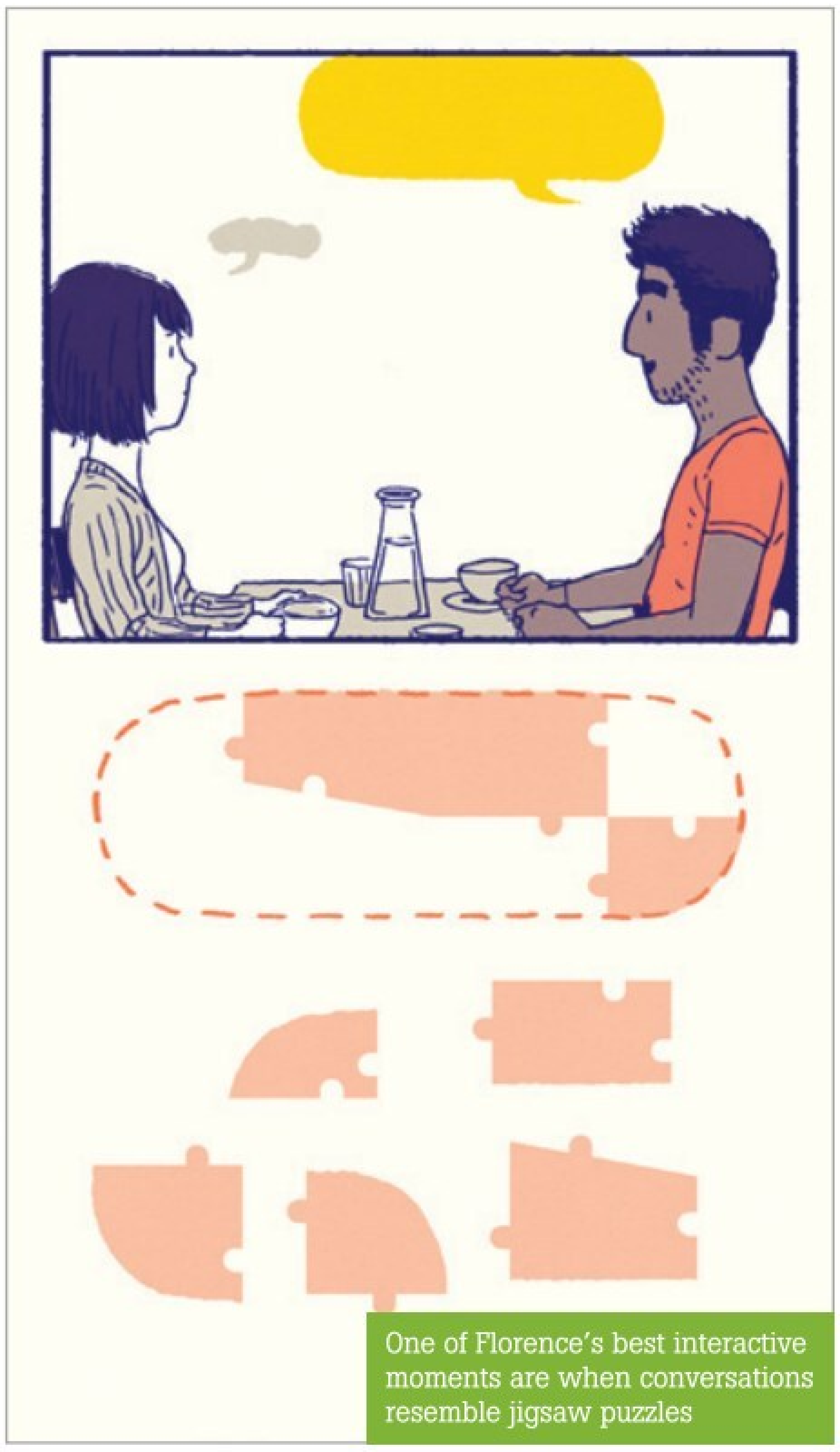
» **Graphics**
The gorgeous pastel-like aesthetics appropriately change from vivid visuals to softer colors depending on the emotional intensity of a scene

» **Sound**
A moving orchestra soundtrack effectively accentuates both the quiet and tense moments

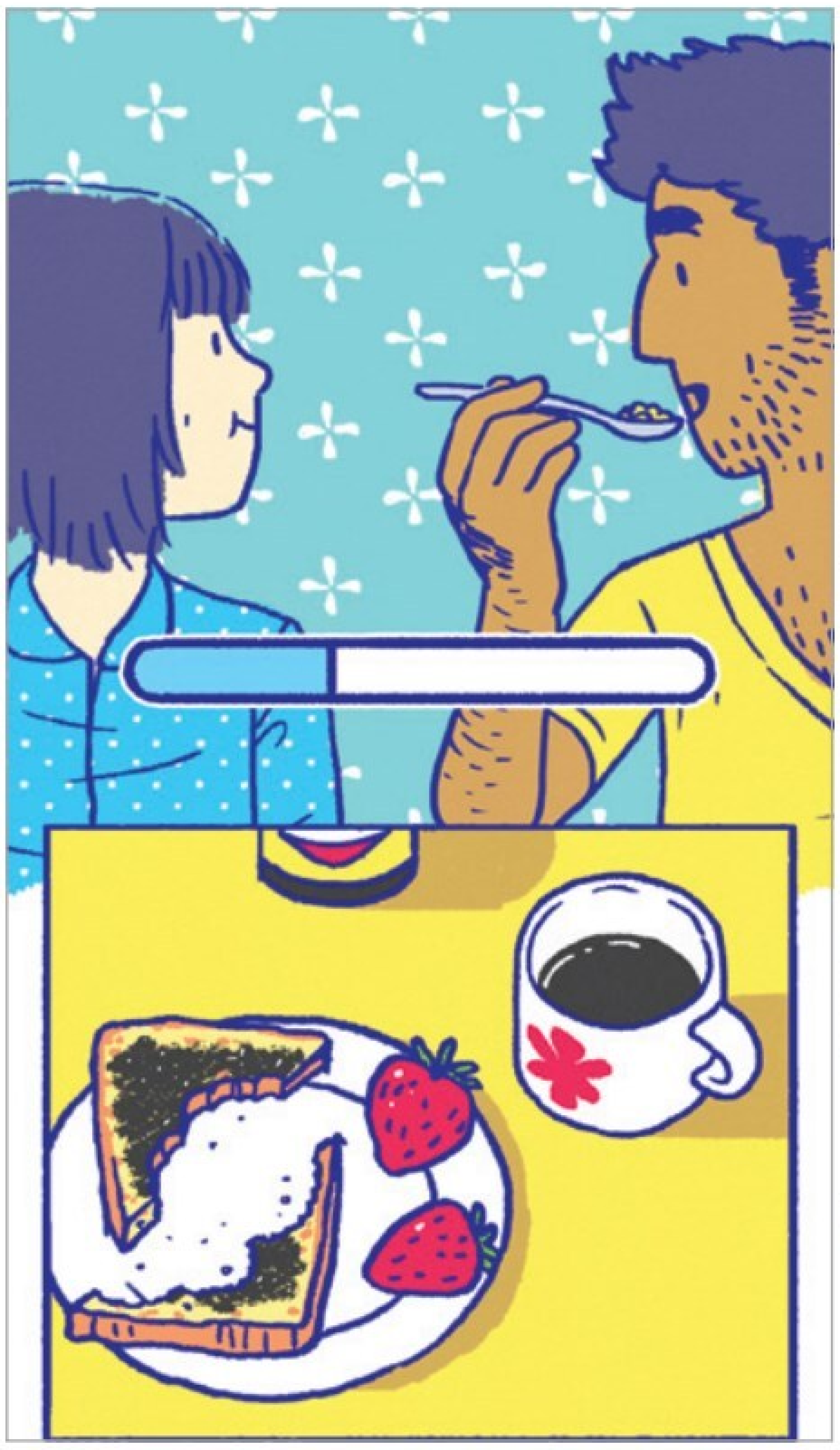
» **Playability**
Interactive scenes control smoothly as you complete collages and solve simple math problems

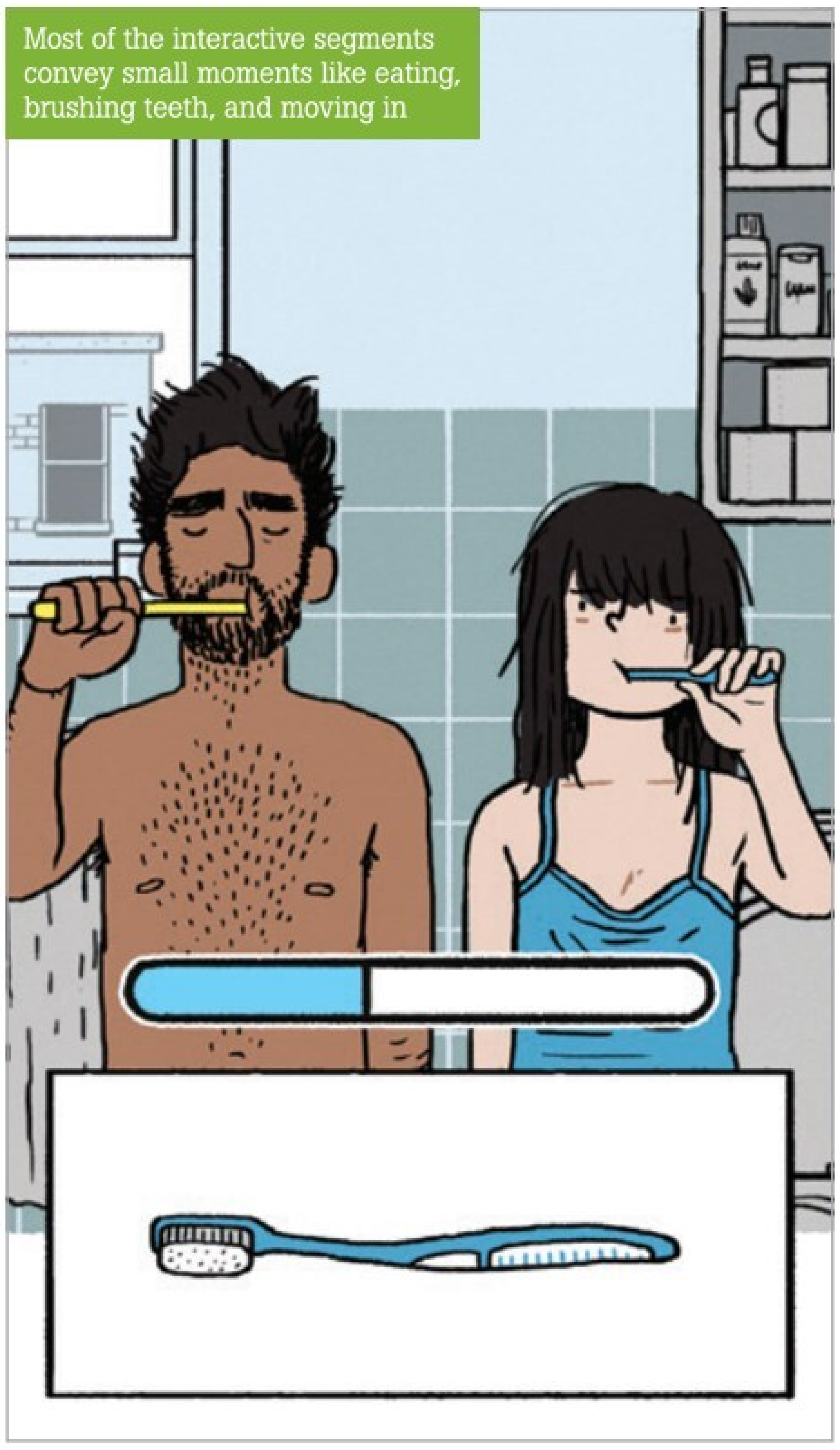
» **Entertainment**
Florence weaves its alluring aesthetics, simple interactivity, and genuine story in creative and compelling ways

» **Replay Value**
Low



One of Florence's best interactive moments are when conversations resemble jigsaw puzzles





Most of the interactive segments convey small moments like eating, brushing teeth, and moving in

6.5 The Station

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release February 20 **Rating** T

None of your discoveries made aboard space station Espial are substantial – just cryptic audio recordings and notes that hint at a larger story that never truly unfurls. – Andrew Reiner

2 Fear Effect: Sedna

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Release March 6 **Rating** M

Even diehard fans of the original Fear Effect should stay away from this mess of broken gameplay, system-breaking bugs, and slapdash narrative. – Ben Reeves

8 Warhammer: Vermintide 2

Platform PC **Release** March 8 **Rating** M

Vermintide 2's co-op delights are gruesome fun, especially if you have a dedicated group of friends to take on the horde of monsters and level up your characters. The bloody thrills of working with fellow players to shred entire armies of foes into meat makes this grisly battlefield surprisingly fun (if unsettling) place to spend time. – Javy Gwaltney

7.75 Moss

Platform PSVR **Release** February 27 **Rating** E

Moss struggles with some aspects of its VR implementation. Playing a video game with your neck isn't particularly fun and the motion controls cause more trouble than they're worth, but many moments are aided by wearing the headset. Seeing myself for the first time was a fun surprise, and directly interacting with Quill, like giving her a high-five after completing a puzzle, wouldn't feel the same in a standard game. Despite its shortcomings, Moss is one of my favorite virtual-reality experiences, and I look forward to seeing where the story goes next. – Kyle Hilliard

6.5 Way Of The Passive Fist

Platform PS4, PC **Release** March 6 **Rating** T

The rhythm-based combat and malleable difficulty set Way of the Passive Fist apart from most brawlers in an interesting way. But while it starts strong, the combat doesn't carry it over a host of issues. – Suriel Vazquez

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YAKUZA

Examining how Sega continues to create compelling and ambitious adventures in the seedy underbelly of modern Japan

Following a tumultuous early-2000s that saw internal strife and change at Sega, the publisher was looking for new paths. Fresh from its exodus from the console-manufacturing business, Sega had to face market realities. Interest in mascot-driven games like Sonic was fading and the industry was maturing beyond many of its well-known properties. Gamers wanted new experiences, and Sega needed a hit. Instead of playing it safe, Sega took a risk betting on a gritty new concept from longtime producer and director Toshihiro Nagoshi. The gamble paid off, leading to a new flagship franchise and launching Sega into a new era of gaming. ***by Brian Shea***

During that time, Nagoshi, who had previously worked on franchises like Daytona U.S.A., Super Monkey Ball, and Shenmue, noted a definite shift in preference toward the North American style of game design. He felt the most popular games during that timeframe followed similar conventions, with few risks. He wanted to break out from that standardized style. Nagoshi also wanted to demonstrate that Japanese developers could create interesting games set in Japan. The result was Yakuza, an action-packed series about the infamous Japanese crime syndicate that has now captivated players for more than a decade.

For series producer Daisuke Sato, the mission was to give adults a reason to remain gamers. “Japanese players tend to step away from gaming after they join the work force; they’re either too busy or they’ve gotten bored with the medium after playing games since childhood,” he says. “We created Yakuza in hopes of bringing those adults back to the gaming world.”

Sato’s inspiration to develop a series based on the yakuza stemmed from other popular media in Japan. At the time, movies and comics were telling great stories about these crime families, but Japanese video games centered on the yakuza didn’t really exist. He believed the subject matter could be just as successful in video game form.

When Nagoshi brought up the concept internally, questions arose regarding the idea’s viability. Because the yakuza was largely unexplored territory for video games, the team had to adamantly defend its decisions to executives. “It raised a lot of eyebrows from both inside and outside the company,” Sato says. “We were often asked, ‘Is this game really going to sell?’ Their concern was that the hardware makers wouldn’t be interested in a title like this. As the director, Nagoshi took a lot of heat, but he stood firm in his belief in both the game and the team.”

After winning the battle for the game’s existence, the team worked on a modest budget to develop the first title. Sega brought in noted yakuza crime novelist Hase Seishū, who helped craft the underworld vibe in the first two games. The first game introduced Kazuma Kiryu as he seeks bitter vengeance for a wrongdoing within the ranks of the yakuza. The tale is rife with twists, intrigue, and betrayal.

The series' premiere had modest returns, but made enough to justify a sequel. However, Nagoshi and Sato say it wasn't until Yakuza 2 sold nearly 600,000 copies in Japan in less than a month that they believed in the series' staying power. Though the first games received critical praise and performed well in Japan, Western markets proved reluctant to embrace the series.

The franchise continued selling well in Japan, fostering several sequels and spin-offs, as well as a live-action film in 2007. An influx of famous Japanese actors expressed interest in playing roles in the Yakuza games, a reversal of fortune after so many performers rejected appearing in the first game.

The growing enthusiasm surrounding the series over the years can be largely attributed to the relatability of the characters amidst extraordinary situations. This was further demonstrated in Yakuza 3, which gave Kiryu more depth than before. Even though Kiryu is known to crack thugs' skulls without much thought, his kind-hearted nature and relationships with supporting characters like Goro Majima and Haruka Sawamura captured the hearts of players. Kiryu's evolution from a young gang member to a man running an orphanage delighted fans.

Nagoshi understands that even in an action-packed story, crafting characters with wide-ranging personalities is important in creating a relatable experience. "In this day and age, having really stylish action movies just isn't enough; you've got to have something like *Kingsmen* and stuff like that," he says. "You've got to have a little bit more going on to keep people's attention and keep them watching from moment to moment. I understand that as a student of Hollywood and movies."

Outside the serious drama, the quixotic, deeply Japanese side activities became beloved by fans. With optional jaunts like taking the stage at a karaoke bar to helping a kid get a video game that was a nod to Dragon Quest's popularity, these diversions sometimes venture into the realm of the ridiculous. The silly nature of these can serve as a welcomed reprieve from the serious tone of the main storylines.

According to Sato, they've intentionally left it up to players to decide how much humor they want in their game. "If they only want to experience a serious drama, they'll probably play the main story without even glancing at the substories and minigames, at least on their first playthrough. Then maybe they'll try those out on their second run," he says. "On the other hand, some players enjoy the huge disparity between the main story's serious tones and the goofy substories, so I think the balance is really up to the player."

Exploring Japan in the shoes of Kiryu is something the series has excelled at

Yakuza 1

Yakuza 2

Yakuza 3 allowed players to see a different side of Kiryu, broadening the protagonist's appeal

Yakuza 4

Yakuza 0 features an oustanding storyline showing how Majima went from a mild-mannered businessman to the Mad Dog of Shimano

One unavoidable element of Yakuza is its savage street fights. Through entries, the combo-focused brawling has only grown in complexity, allowing for additional player experimentation through different fighting styles and brutal finishing moves. To conceptualize these ruthless moves, the series' planners and designers take in action movies and come up with new moves to pitch to Nagoshi.

As the fanfare caught more fire, the West slowly began taking notice. Yakuza 0 served as a prequel entry told through the eyes of both Kiryu and Majima, creating a compelling drama of intertwined fates. This is the entry that slid into Western markets' mainstream consciousness. In addition, the prequel nature of Yakuza 0 made it a perfect place for newcomers to start. Yakuza Kiwami, a remake of the original game, allowed those players to jump right in following the events of Yakuza 0.

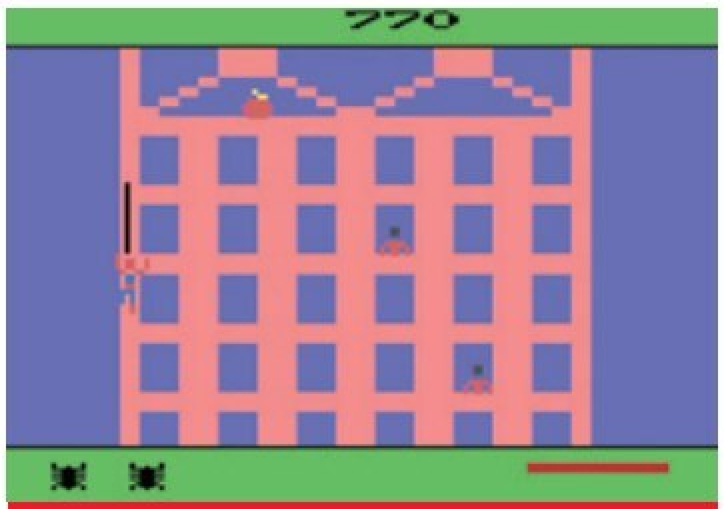
Yakuza's newfound global success has paved the way for future projects. Yakuza 6: Song of Life launches this month (read our review on page 92), and Yakuza Kiwami 2, a modern remake of Yakuza 2, was announced for Western release this year (read our preview on page 71). In addition, Sega is already working on a new Yakuza project that shines the spotlight on a new protagonist named Ichiban Kasuga, a man with a different background and relationship with the yakuza than Kiryu.

For Sega, the ceiling is higher than ever for the red-hot Yakuza series. Only time will tell if this renewed popularity in Western markets is sustainable, but as long as the developers continue to complement compelling drama with Yakuza's signature brand of brutal action, prospects look good.

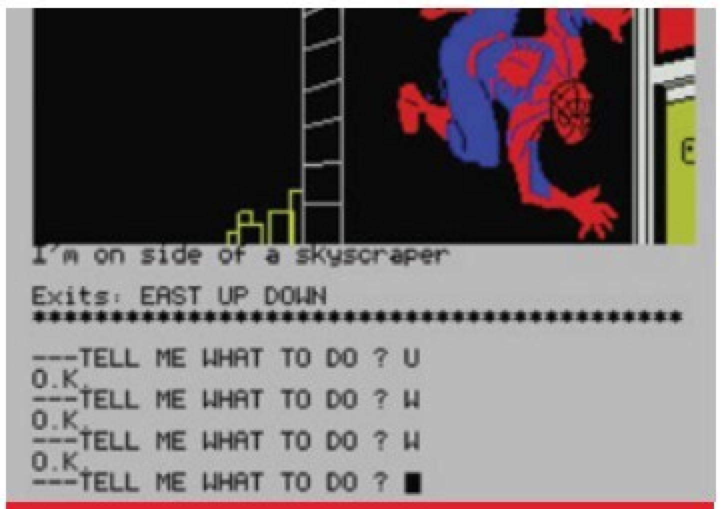
Yakuza 5

The Visual Evolution Of Spider-Man

Since Spider-Man's debut on the Atari 2600 in 1982, more than 35 video games starring the web-slinger have come out on various systems. We chronicle how his look has evolved in games across four decades.



Spider-Man (1982)
Atari 2600



```
I'm on side of a skyscraper
Exits: EAST UP DOWN
*********************************************
---TELL ME WHAT TO DO ? U
O.K.
---TELL ME WHAT TO DO ? W
O.K.
---TELL ME WHAT TO DO ? W
O.K.
---TELL ME WHAT TO DO ? █
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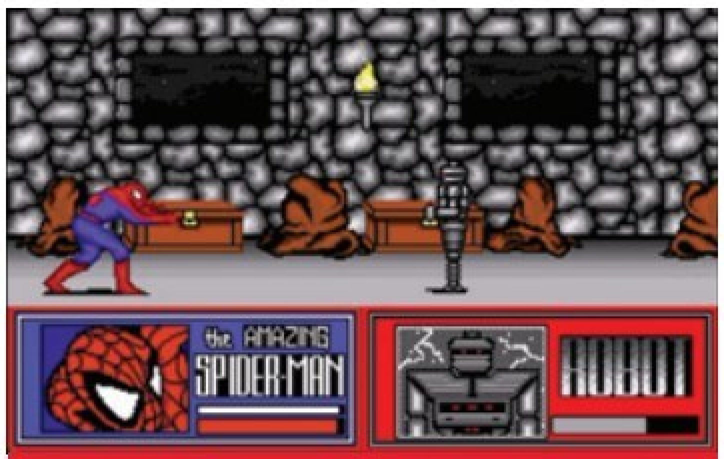
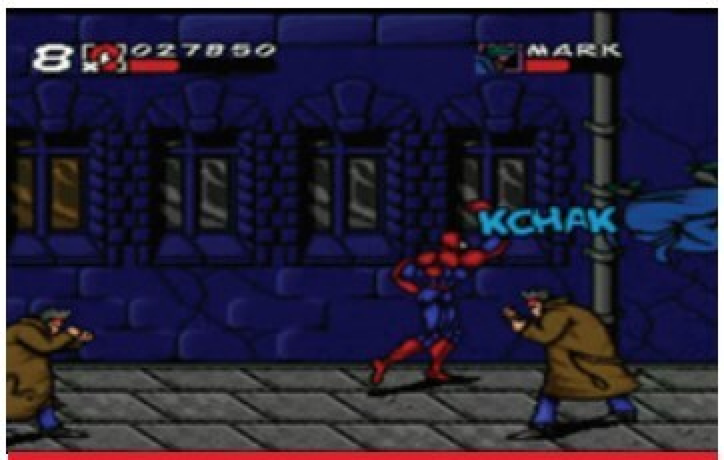
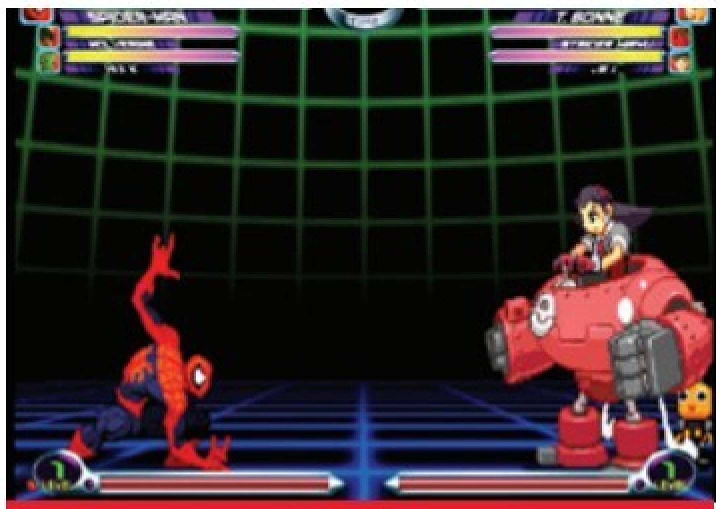
Questprobe: Spider-Man (1984)
Apple II, Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum, PC



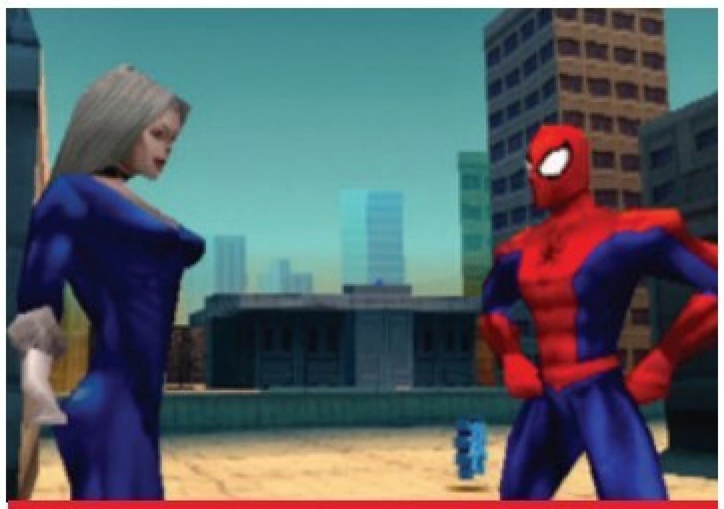
Spider-Man and Captain America in Doctor Doom's Revenge (1989)
DOS, Amiga, Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum



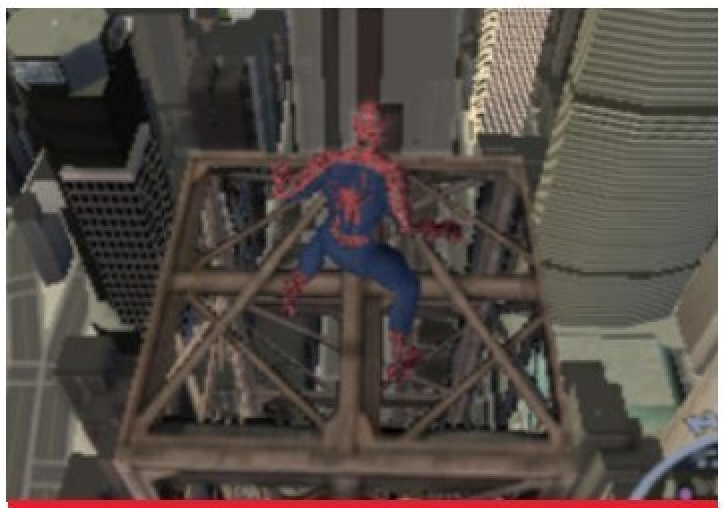
Spider-Man and Venom: Maximum Carnage (1994)
SNES, Genesis



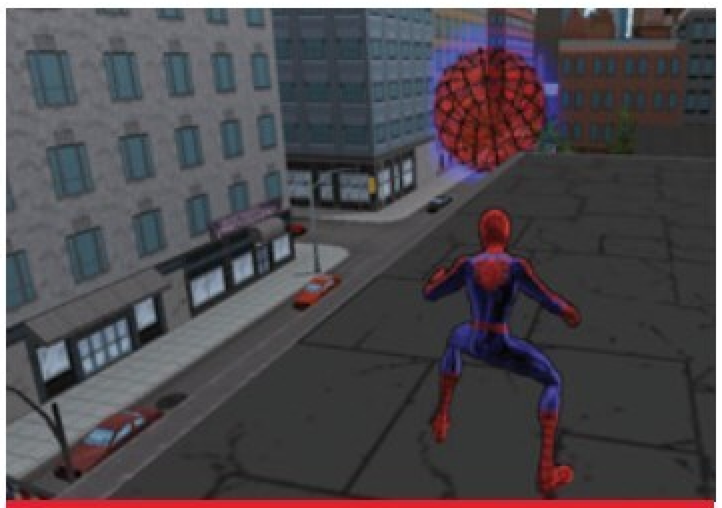
Marvel vs. Capcom 2 (2000)
Arcade, Dreamcast, PS2, Xbox



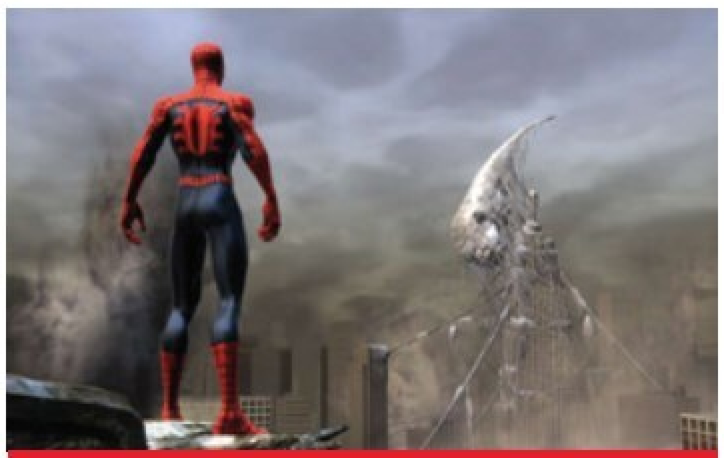
Spider-Man (2000)
PlayStation, N64, Dreamcast, PC



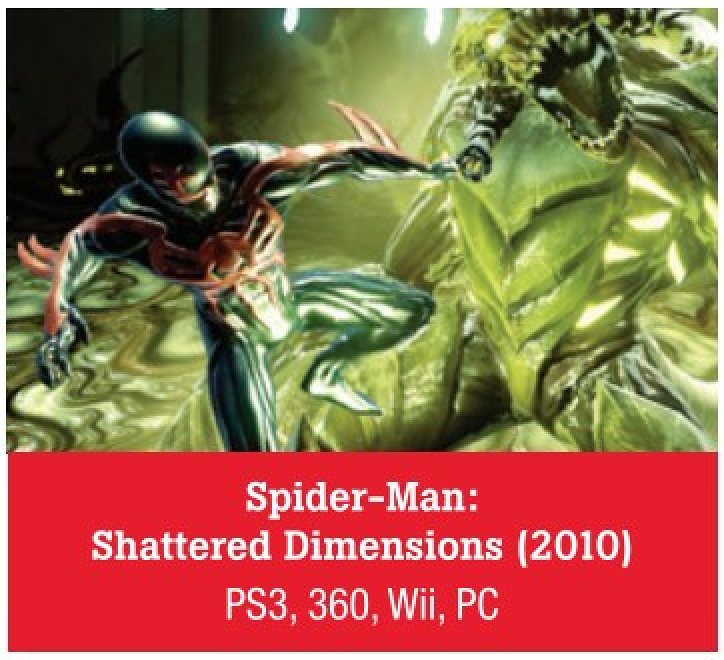
Spider-Man 2 (2004)
PS2, Xbox, GameCube



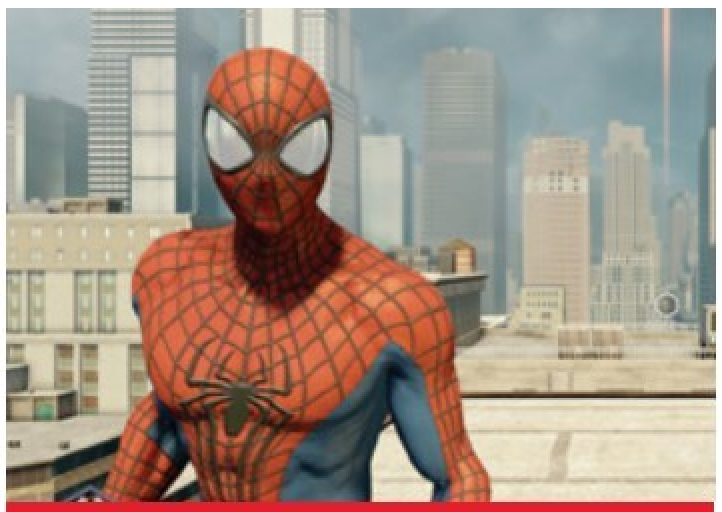
Ultimate Spider-Man (2005)
PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC



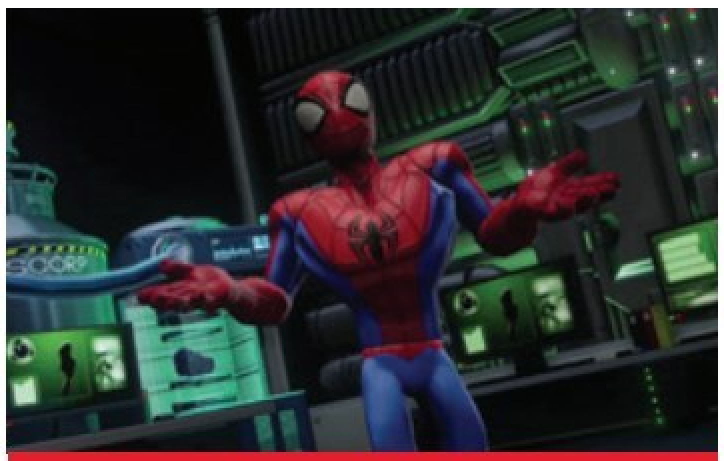
Spider-Man: Web of Shadows (2008)
PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PC



Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions (2010)
PS3, 360, Wii, PC



The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (2014)
PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, Wii U, PC



Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes (2014)
PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, Wii U, PC

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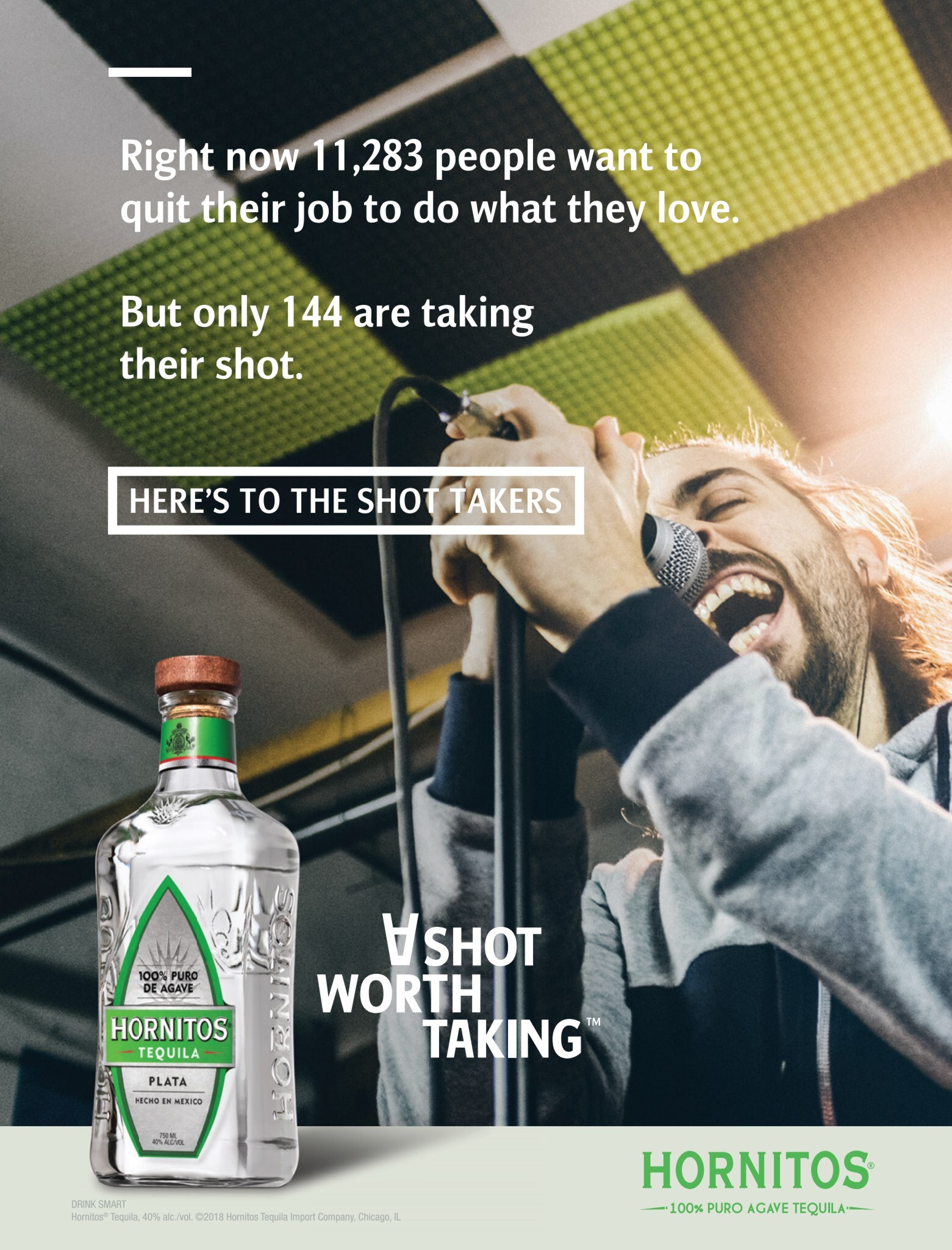
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